SEPTEMBER

10¢

Ace-High Western Stories

BLOODHART
KJELGAARD
BERARD
AND MANY OTHERS!

STEEL TRACKS THROUGH HELL

A NOVEL OF EARLY RAILROAD WARFARE
by ROLLAND LYNCH

THAT DIE-HARD TEXAN!

HARD-HITTING NOVELETTE OF THE OLD WEST!
by BARRY CORD

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DIE-HARD TEXAN!
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by BARRY CORD

...LAN

GRUEN KENT BENRUS

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Send coupon below with a dollar bill and a brief note telling me who you are, your occupation, and a few other facts about yourself. Indicate the watch you want on coupon, giving number and price.

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If satisfied, you pay 10 monthly payments. If you are not satisfied after wearing the watch for ten days, send it back and I'll return your dollar on our

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R22 – Ladies' BULOVA; 17 J. 10K yel. gold plate. $24.75
M17–Man's BULOVA; 15 J. 10K yel. rolled gold plate case; bracelet. $24.75
$1 deposit $2.38 a month

L140 $37.50

S141 $37.50

L140 – Ladies' ELGIN; 17 J. 10K yel. gold filled case. $37.50
S141 – Man's ELGIN–sturdy 10K yellow gold filled case; 17 jewels. $37.50
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P143 – Ladies' tiny KENT. 7 jewels. Guaranteed. $15.95
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O564 $19.75

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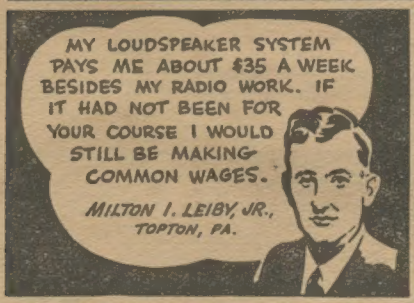
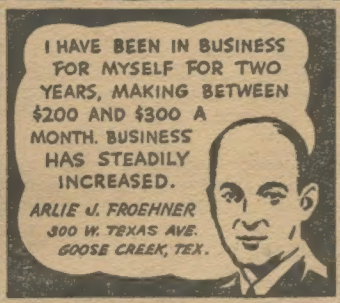
JAMES E. RYAN
119 PEBBLE COURT
FALL RIVER, MASS.

CLIPPING YOUR COUPON GOT ME STARTED IN RADIO. I AM NOW IN CHARGE OF THE RADIO DEPARTMENT FOR THE AMERICAN AIRLINES AT CLEVELAND.
WALTER B. MURRAY
AMERICAN AIRLINES, MUNICIPAL AIRPORT, CLEVELAND, OHIO.


MY LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM PAYS ME ABOUT $35 A WEEK BESIDES MY RADIO WORK. IF IT HAD NOT BEEN FOR YOUR COURSE I WOULD STILL BE MAKING COMMON WAGES.
MILTON I. LEIBY, JR.,
TOPTON, PA.


I HAVE BEEN IN BUSINESS FOR MYSELF FOR TWO YEARS, MAKING BETWEEN $200 AND $300 A MONTH. BUSINESS HAS STEADILY INCREASED.
ARLIE J. FROEHNER
300 W. TEXAS AVE.
GOOSE CREEK, TEX.

I MAKE $40 A MONTH FIXING RADIOS IN SPARE TIME. I STARTED MAKING EXTRA MONEY 3 MONTHS AFTER BEGINNING THE N.R.I. COURSE AND MADE ABOUT $100 WHILE LEARNING.
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If you're looking for a quick way to better pay, and a chance to get a good, permanent job in a field of real opportunity, here's the formula that has worked for the men you see above, and hundreds of others, too. It's not a "miracle cure" nor a "long-chance" operation. It is a time-tested, practical way to make $5 to $10 a week extra a few months from now, and to prepare for a full-time job paying up to $50 a week as a Radio Technician or Radio Operator.

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On top of record business, the Radio Industry is getting millions and millions of dollars in Defense Orders. Over 800 Broadcasting stations in the U. S. employ thousands of Radio Technicians and Radio Operators with average pay among the country's best paid industries. Repairing, servicing, selling home and auto Radio receivers (there are more than 50,000,000 in use) gives jobs to thousands. Many other Radio Technicians take advantage of the opportunities to have their own service or retail Radio business. Think of the many good pay jobs in connection with Aviation, Commercial, Police Radio and Public Address Systems. N. R. I. trains you to be ready when Television opens new jobs.

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Nearly every neighborhood offers opportunities for a good part-time Radio Technician to make extra money fixing Radio sets. I give you special training to show you how to start cashing in on these opportunities early. You get Radio parts and instructions for building test equipment, for conducting experiments that give you valuable practical experience. You also get a modern Professional Radio Servicing Instrument. My fifty-fifty method—half working with Radio parts, half studying my lesson texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, practical.

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J. E. Smith, President
Dept. 1JS9 National Radio Institute
Washington D. C.

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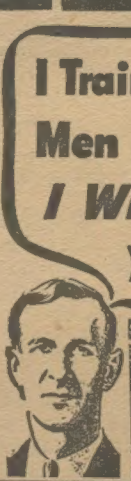

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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Vol. IV, No. 2 CONTENTS September, 1941

Two Complete Western Novels

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Lane Dolan staked his best girl's fortune and his own life that he'd ram a wagon-train through the renegade deadline, and run a gantlet of thirty flaming guns—in the hands of desert freighters he'd hired to side him!

STEEL TRACKS THROUGH HELL . . . . Rolland Lynch **40**
Every rancher in Sweetwater Valley faced ruin, unless Jim Durkin could stop the end-of-track 'accidents'—by branding himself a liar, an ingrate and a double-dealing traitor!

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THAT DIE-HARD TEXAN! . . . . . Barry Cord **92**
Against both Ranger law and bushwhack killers, a Texas drifter hit the vengeance trail—with only a jewsharp to prove his payoff killings worthy in the eyes of Boot-hill's Gods!

Five Dynamic Out-trail Stories

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Young Kirby Grant had never tried robbing a bank before, but he picked up all the tricks in one flaming hour—at the end of his new-found outlaw saddlemate's trail!

ROUGH, TOUGH—AND LONELY . . . . Jack Bloodhart **59**
All his lonely life, hatred had dogged the steps of Buffalo Carrigan, till a tiny found-ling girl smiled up at him—and gave him something worth fighting and dying for!

SECOND-CHANCE HERO . . . . . Dabney Otis Collins **69**
On Mike Askew's war-torn home range, folks called him a coward. Then, after four-teen years below the Border, he rode back—to face the bullet storm with an empty gun!

ONLY THE BRAVE CAN BE FREE . . . . Jim Kjelgaard **77**
True to his freedom-loving forebears, Rolf Olsen turned his back on his bride-to-be and her dowry—to earn his life's stake like a man in the Northwest's white hell!

DOC WONG DIGS A GRAVE . . . . . Ralph Berard **85**
With oriental wisdom, a Chinese sawbones answered the mine-camp robber's order—with four candles and a box of American dynamite!

Ace-High Feature

OUT-TRAIL CARAVAN . . . . . The Editor **6**

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NEXT ISSUE ON SALE SEPTEMBER 25TH

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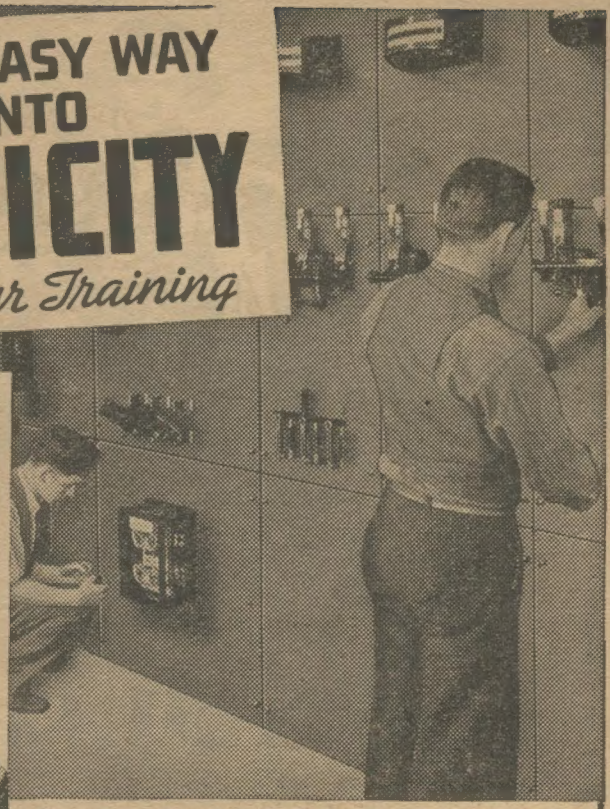

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Don't let lack of money hold you back. If you are between the ages of 16 and 40, you can get this training first and pay for it in 12 monthly payments—**beginning 60 days after your training period ends.** You'll be amazed at how little money you need to get Coyne training. If you need part-time work to help out with living expenses while you train, my employment department will help you find it. **Lifetime employment service after you graduate.** Mail coupon for all the facts.

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Please send me your Big FREE Book and all the facts about Coyne and your plans to help fellows like me get ahead.

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ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

Out-Trail Caravan

A LOT of people pride themselves on their Mayflower ancestry, or the fact that their great-great-great grandfathers fought in the Revolution. That's all right, if they get any satisfaction out of it. By our Constitution, we Americans don't have any dukes or viscounts or 'sirs'. Our own special form of ancestor worship, in a way, takes the place of inherited titles. It's a human weakness, and a fairly harmless one, that leads us to dream up reasons for being proud of our forebears; it makes us feel that maybe we have the edge on the rest of the world.

It's all right if it isn't overdone. But show me a man who spends any considerable time thinking or talking about what his ancestors have done, and I'll show you a snob. And a snob hasn't any place in American life. Our democratic way of living just has no place for him. We honor a man during his lifetime—for what he has done—and "let the dead bury the dead."

Somehow, though, the West's special, unique code of aristocracy is something else again. When a man is called "colonel" because he once sat in a poker game for forty-eight hours without rising from his chair, or because he can tell by the sound whether it was a .45 or a .45-70 Winchester that was fired, the principles of democracy seem quite safe.

The cattle country has always been liberal with its titles. An important rancher or a popular man is often called "colonel" or "judge" or even "senator." There were a few who acquired their titles legitimately. But most of the horde of "colonels" and "judges" of the West never came close to a sword or a gavel.

A Livestock auctioneer, by virtue of his office, was always called a colonel. He had to be a man who could think quickly, and usually he possessed some wit and

(Continued on page 8)

YES, BROTHER... LIFE GOES ON!

"Take it from me, brother—I *know!*

"Seems like yesterday, I was buddies with another young chap in the shop. One day at lunch hour, he said to me, 'Ted, I figure the only way to get ahead on this job—or any other—is *training!* Why, if they offered me a foreman's job today, I couldn't handle it. Don't *know* enough! But I'm going to learn! I'm signing for an I. C. S. Course!'

"I said I might do the same—but while I was hemming and hawing, the old world was moving along . . . *fast!* Today, my old buddy is General Superintendent, and I'm still on the same old job!

"Brother, Life won't wait for you! If you're going to amount to anything, ever, the time to start is *right now!*"

• • •

That's a sad story—but true! Don't let it happen to you! Start *now* to get the specialized, up-to-date training that will make you eligible for the bigger, better paying jobs in your field. The coupon below will bring you complete information on the International Correspondence Schools—the Schools that have helped hundreds of thousands of ambitious men to better jobs. The time to act is NOW!

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(Continued from page 6)

had a wide circle of important friends.

In "The Trampling Herd," by Paul I. Wellman, there is a story about one auctioneer who was being cross-examined in a lawsuit over a certain cattle transaction. Unable to trip up the witness in his testimony, the lawyer tried another tack.

With fine sarcasm, he said, "They call you colonel. And what regiment, pray, were you colonel in?"

"I reckon ye could call it the cow brigade," the colonel drawled.

"Come, come now!" said the lawyer. "I have asked you a legitimate question and I am entitled to a serious answer."

"Waal, it's like this," the colonel explained. "The 'colonel' in front of my name is like the 'honorable' in front of yours. It don't mean a thing."

Then, too, there were many men who were granted their titles out of respect. Men like Colonel William F. Cody, the world-famous Buffalo Bill. Or Major Andrew Drumm, the first man to raise cattle in the Cherokee Strip.

The first settlers, the trail-breakers, the town-builders all earned their rightful places in the West's great Stagecoach Aristocracy. We honor them today for what they were, and for what they did. Their deeds, and the sterling example of their courage, have passed into a tradition that is one of our proud national heritages.

In *Ace-High* it is not our usual practice to print fact articles of the West and its famous sons. *Ace-High* is a fiction magazine. Yet there is hardly one of its stories that doesn't have its parallel in the true annals of the cattleland.

We don't know which of the early trail-drivers Ed Earl Repp was thinking of when he sat down to write "All Trails Closed to Lordsburg!"—the feature novel in this issue. More than likely, he selected incidents from the lives of more than one of the pioneers. But as we read it in manuscript form, and then later in proof, we had the haunting impression that we were riding along with Lane Dolan on a real cattle-drive of the dangerous early days. Fact and fiction are so closely allied, in the great saga of the West, that it is frequently hard to tell the two apart.

The life of John Chisum, for instance, probably has provided hundreds of authors with material for fiction stories. And every one different. A man of iron, like Chisum, who fought Indians, Mexicans and renegades; who broke trail through an uncharted wilderness when he drove his herds to market; who built up a vast herd like the Jingle Bob in a savage, untamed territory where a man had to battle every inch of the way if he hoped to survive—such a man has a life story that is an almost bottomless well of drama and excitement and colorful adventure.

Ace-High is dedicated to the high purpose of keeping alive America's memory of the West's ringing deeds. Whether the hero of one certain story is called Lane Dolan or John Chisum, really doesn't matter a great deal. The point is that the hardships he overcomes and the battles he wins or loses are part and parcel of the West that really was.

We are proud of the Chisums, the Mastersons, the Pierces, the Earps—and all the rest of the Stagecoach Aristocracy. Call them "Colonel" or "Judge" or just plain "John" and "Bill," we revere their memory. And if, in the pages of *Ace-High*, we can keep their names and their achievements fresh in the minds of a new generation, we feel that we have accomplished a worthy task.

THE EDITOR

I'm Drafting Men

-WHO WANT NEW BODIES!

and in just 15 minutes a day I'll prove I can make you A NEW MAN

I'M "trading-in" old bodies for new! I'm taking men who know that the condition of their arms, shoulders, chests and legs—their strength, "wind," and endurance—is not 100%. And I'm making NEW MEN of them. Right now I'm even training thousands of soldiers and sailors who KNOW they've got to get into shape FAST!

How do YOU measure up for the defense of your country? Have YOU the strong shoulders and back that can haul for miles Uncle Sam's standard 61 pounds of Army man's equipment? Or if home defense presses you into service, have you the he-man strength and tireless energy that double-shifts of working and watching may call for?

Now As Never Before You Need a Body That's Ready for ANY Job in National Emergency!

"GOD BLESS AMERICA"—yes, we all pray that. But it's the BODIES of America's MAN-POWER that must make that blessing safe. Where do YOU fit in? Are you ALL MAN—tough-muscled, on your toes every minute, with all the up-and-at-'em that can lick your weight in wildcats? Or do you want the help I can give you—the help that has already worked wonders for others, everywhere?

All the world knows I was ONCE a skinny, scrawny 97-lb. weakling. And NOW it knows that I won the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." Against all comers! How did I do it? How do I work miracles in the bodies of other men in such quick time? The answer is **"Dynamic Tension,"** the amazing method I discovered and which changed me from a 97-pound weakling into the champion you see here!

In just 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home, I'm ready to prove that "Dynamic Tension" can lay a new outfit of solid muscle over every inch of your body. Let me put new, smashing power into your arms and shoulders—give you an armor-shield of stomach muscle that laughs at punches—strengthen your legs into real columns of surging stamina. If lack of exercise or wrong living has weakened your inside. I'll get after that condition, too, and show you how it feels to LIVE!

These Are Atlas MEN!

5 Inches of New Muscle!

"My arms increased 1½", chest 2½", forearm ⅞"."—C. S., W. Va.

What a Difference!

"Have put 3½" on chest (normal) and 2½" expanded"—F. S., N. Y.

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I don't ask you to take my say-so for it. I'm ready to PROVE it with actual photos of men I have rebuilt. What "Dynamic Tension" has done for them it can certainly do for you. In just 15 MINUTES A DAY. See how. See RESULTS. See my book! It's yours FREE, but you must act AT ONCE. Times are moving too fast to put it off a single day. Mail this coupon NOW to me personally: CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 83J, 115 East 23rd St., New York City.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 83J
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I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength"—and full details of your TRIAL OFFER.

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

City..... State.....

ALL TRAILS CLOSED

★ ★ ★ **A hard-driving novel of guts and gunsmoke on a death trail to rail head**

Bullman's sixgun was in his hand as he shouted the order.

Lane Dolan bet $10,000 and his life that he'd ram his five-wagon freighter train through to Lordsburg town, even if he had to smash a Tucson renegade's desert deadline - - - and then face thirty flaming guns in the hands of caravan fighters he'd hired to side him!

TO LORDSBURG!

By ED EARL REPP ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

CHAPTER ONE

Satan's Outpost

DUST blanketed the streets of Tucson, hammered by the sun and wind and pony hoofs into a red powder that seemed to hang rigid all day without settling. With curious

eyes, Lane Dolan rode down Congress Street, letting the sights and smells of the frontier town swirl about him. It was something he had not tasted in eleven months. He could sense the difference in it, a heaviness of spirit, even a despondency that seemed to have slowed the once fast pace of the town down to a walk.

There were fewer people on the streets today than when he had left for Abilene with the Ox-Bow trail herd nearly a year ago. Even then he had known the exodus was beginning. The cruel fact had come home to too many folks that it was yet not a country for white men, and wouldn't be for many years.

Lane was one of those who still argued that it was not a place for the easily-discouraged, and never would be. The Territory was a wide, free range for men who loved to fight, and for women who stuck by them. It was no place for the weak.

Sam Starr, who had owned the Ox-Bow outfit and who had sent Lane up the trail with a herd almost a year ago, was another who believed in wearing his chin out in front. But Sam was dead now, prey to Apaches, and his ranch had gone by the board. Lane was carrying all that was left of it—ten thousand dollars cash from the sale of the cattle.

He turned his weary blue roan pacer into the livery stable, his dusty pack horse following. The bald-headed man who came from the forge, in the rear, squinted through the barn's fragrant gloom. Then his fat, sweaty features jerked into a smile.

"Lane, boy!" he cried. "The red divvils didn't get you!"

"Somebody say they did?" Lane chuckled. Tully Coin's big hand wrung his own lean brown fingers. Tully shook his head.

"They've been havin' their man for breakfast 'most every week," he said. "Miss Beth's been quiet as a mouse for worry over you. You knew about Sam?"

"The wire reached me the day before I left Abilene."

"Then it was one of the last wires to get through. The line has been down most of the time since."

The row of empty stalls was in the corner of Lane's eye. He could see into the grain room. It appeared to be nearly empty.

"How about you, Tully? Are they scarin' you out yet?"

Tully Coin's big jaw was dogged. "I'd sell this place, was there a man fool enough to buy. Tucson don't need a big livery stable no more. Population's down fifty percent. I can't get feed enough, with freight as uncertain as a woman's mind. Hard times, hard times! But Jergen, one of your Ox-Bow compadres, was in the other day sayin' Anson's going to let the whole outfit go, end of the month."

Lane was untying a saddle bag when Tully asked, "You ain't seen Miss Beth yet?"

Lane threw the dusty bag over his shoulder. "I haven't seen anybody. Where'll I find her, Tully?"

"She took a room at the Drovers' since Sam was killed."

Lane went out. But he did not immediately head for the Drover's. For the meeting that was ahead he had need of a long drink and a strong one.

Many-tongued Tucson kept to the shade of the flat wooden awnings protruding from the mud buildings. Everyone smoked. Cigars for the well-to-do Gringo, wheat shucks for the puncher, miner and freighter. Indians polluted the air with skunk-cabbage stogies. From the yellow meerschaums of German merchants rose gray clouds to mix with the smoke of Mexican girls' *papel orozus* cigarettes. In Tucson, you could smell a man's nationality before you saw him, by the smoke he gave off.

For all the hard miles behind him,

Lane Dolan's legs had more spring than those of any man on the street of the discouraged town. He had the lean, brown hardness of the men whose trade is riding troubled ranges. Trail hardships had sliced away whatever pretension to burliness he might have had. He was sparely-built, almost gaunt, his arms and legs long. But his body was as tough as the beef rawhide on the big Miles City tree he lived in. The toughened flesh of his face was as dark as a Mexican's, and against it his bleached eyebrows and light blue eyes stood out strikingly.

He walked unrecognized into the Congress Bar. Straight whiskey was the drink he called for, with a beer chaser. He dropped the saddlebag on the floor at his feet.

A moment later his attention was captured by three men at a table near the front. Lane listened, wondering if it was his name he had heard spoken. Looking at the men, he knew it was.

ONE was a stoutish man in an old corduroy jacket, his shoulders looking, from the the back, like those of a grizzly. Thinning gray hair was brushed over a bald, sunburned crown. He sat leaning on his elbow, his short body hunched forward. This was Cobb Anson, who had taken over the Ox-Bow ranch a few months ago.

Anson was chuckling. "Dolan'll think he's going to set the world on fire," he wagged his head. "You give any run-of-the-mine cowprod a few thousand pesos—and hell, he's going to make the Territory his range and Texas his buck pasture. But we'll see some fun out of him."

Jess Diamond had been range foreman for Sam Starr when Lane had left Tucson, but here he was, drinking with Cobb Anson. He was a tall, lean cowboy with horsey features and a stiff shock of sandy hair that fell over his forehead. His voice tabbed East Texas as his home.

"Mebbeso Lane ain't a-goin' to come back," Diamond said slowly. "He's been gone an almighty long time. Could be Geronimo tested his big wind for him, an' the buzzards are pickin' his bones."

"Don't talk that-away," Anson charged. "I'm like to bust out snifflin'."

Tom Silver, Anson's top bronc-peeler for years, sopped the butt of a cigar in a finger of whiskey. Then he sucked on the shredded stogie.

"Some fellers hit it purty soft," he growled. "Marryin' a bag of money's a damn' sight easier'n makin' it. Nor the gal that goes with it wouldn't be hard to take neither."

Tom Silver's aggressive, darkly handsome face turned a moment later to confront the tall cowboy who was approaching the table. Unrecognizing, he put a slow glance on the rider whose massive Mexican bell-spurs jingled as he walked. There was nothing unusual about him, other than the fixity of his pale-eyed glances. He wore a faded blue brushpopper jacket and scarred bullhide chaps. He walked stiffly, as though he had just quit the saddle.

"Spur me on the hairy side!" Silver exclaimed abruptly. "It's the jasper hisself, shore as shootin'!"

He got half out of his chair, gingerly offering a handshake, as if to test whether Lane had heard his slurring remark. Lane's fist found him in that awkward position. The cigar was smashed into the back of the bronc-peeler's mouth. Lane's whole body was behind the blow, hurling Silver backwards, chair and all.

Tom Silver struck the dirt floor in a reverse somersault. On all fours he rose up, shaking his head. His face was bloody, with shreds of wet tobacco plastered about his mouth. A surge of fury darkened his eyes as shock wore off.

The sleepy border saloon came wide awake. A bartender was bawling at them to go outside and do their fighting. Cow-

boys bounced to their feet, hurrying front to see the carnage.

TOM SILVER was as tall and many pounds heavier than Lane. He was as wild a bronc-stomper as any Arizona owned, and he didn't confine his fighting talents to horses. His chunky face carried the scars of many a bunkhouse and saloon brawl, but his hairy fists were plenty scarred too.

He came at Lane like an old bull who has put the cowhorse on the short end of the rope; nostrils flared, head forward, both arms swinging. Three feet from the cowpuncher he stopped short, allowing Lane to swing at his chin and miss. Then he stepped in. His fist slapped the puncher on the side of the face, splitting the flesh. His other hand smacked Lane on the jaw.

Lane staggered. Then Silver was all over him. The puncher's chest ached from a blow over the heart; a fist in the stomach pounded the breath from him. Without realizing he was falling, he felt the floor strike his knees.

The sharp pain of his spurs gouging the back of his thighs was what he needed to clear his head. With the sight of big Tom Silver reaching to drag him up on his feet for a knock-out punch, cold hatred poured into him. Lane let the bronc-buster pull him up. But he caught Silver's bicep and held off the blow.

His fist sank deep in the other's belly. He clipped him heavily on the chin and followed with a looping blow to the nose as Silver stumbled away. Badly hurt, the bronc-peeler tried to cover up. Lane chopped his defense aside and cut his face savagely. He took Silver's blows on the elbows and shoulders, grinning at their lack of steam. Tom Silver saw that grin. He tried to crowd Lane back again with a flurry of roundhouse punches. But Lane hurled him back with a short piston-punch over the eye.

He knocked Tom Silver down twice. Both times the man bounced back to his feet. Silver's fight-savvy was that of a bulldog. Hang on until you were finished, his instinct told him, even after his brain was dead and he was stumbling about in a circle flailing the air.

Lane Dolan sidestepped as Silver came reeling in. He threw a haymaker that hit the bronc-peeler in the face like a club. Silver covered his face with his hands and pitched to the floor.

Anson and Diamond were on their feet. Anson's grizzled brows scowled, his heavy-featured countenance was flushed with anger. He was a short man of powerful build, wide in the shoulders and thick through the chest. His face was brown with an underlayer of gray, and there were rolls of fat slung under his chin.

"Care to take up the argument?" Lane asked Anson, thickly.

Anson snorted. "Tuscon'll take the salt out of you, Dolan. You've come back *muy hombre*. Just like I was saying to the boys—ready to call the world your huckleberry."

"One thing I'd like to know," Lane rasped. "That's how come you to call the Ox-Bow your huckleberry?"

Anson's burly shoulders shrugged. "A man can't dodge his debts forever. The bank was going to foreclose on Sam Starr. I taken over his liabilities and give him a thousand dollars into the bargain. By the way, Dolan—the Ox-Bow's been makin' out purty fair without you. I reckon we'll keep on struggling along that-away."

Lane turned toward the bar, the watching cowboys and Mexicans fading back. He slung the saddlebag over his shoulder.

"That suits all around," he said when he stopped at the door. "Seems like you'll have to dig down and find the cost of another postage stamp, Anson. I've

got a letter in this-here mail pouch from you to a gent in Nogales. Picked it up with some others near a burned freight outfit this side of the Whetstones."

Cobb Anson's face hardened, his lips compressing. Shock had small puckers around his soapy-hazel eyes. Suddenly his meaty hand came out.

"I'll take that letter, Dolan!"

"It's out of circulation," Lane told him. "It's U. S. property till it gets to Nogales, if it has to make a dozen false starts. Maybeso it's lucky for you Apaches can't read."

He went out into the sultry heat of the road, feeling the tension he had created following him like the bore of a cannon.

CHAPTER TWO

Prideful Hombre

EVER since he had found the letter among scores of others scattered near the smoking ruins of a string of freight and mail wagons four days out of Tucson, Lane had planned to drop that bombshell in Anson's lap. A letter from Anson to some hombre in Nogales, sinkhole of two nations, the settling pond for the off-scourings of Mexico and the States, piqued his curiosity.

Anson's rise from a run-down iron to one of the biggest layouts in the Territory had been too sudden to be a marvel of business prowess. Wet cattle and Border-hopping transactions seemed indicated. The rancher's letter to the outlaw town that spraddled like a tarantula on the Border might be extremely enlightening; Lane had been tempted time and again to open it. But a perverse sense of honesty had kept the envelope sealed. But the Ox-Bow's boss' face had told him plenty. He had him on the griddle! That in itself was a source of satisfaction.

Sight of the Drovers' Hotel gave Lane a sudden lift of spirits, and at the same time put a cold lump in his stomach. Frowning into the blaze of torrid sunlight, he crossed the street and stood at the threshold, blinking into the cool darkness of the lobby.

Sun-blinded, Lane could hear footfalls coming toward the door, with a shirring of skirts accompanying the sound. The steps ceased. A girl's voice cried: *"Lane!"* and Lane put out his arms just in time to receive the woman who ran from the shadows.

Beth was sobbing, her cheek snuggled against the front of his jumper. Lane's arms caught her to him so roughly that she gasped. He buried his face in her hair, hair that seemed brown until the sun warmed it to a rich copper-gold. Her body was soft against his own hardness. As ever, Lane was amazed that so much laughter and seriousness, so much womanly uncertainty and defiant courage, could be packed into so small a body.

For a moment he was caught in a rush of poignant memories, memories he hadn't wanted. The lonely months had only intensified the ache in his body to possess her. Beth threw her head back, her face streaked with tears.

"Now, then!" Lane scolded. "Is that a way to welcome me back?"

"It's the only way I know," Beth said. "Lane, if I ever let you go away for so long again—eleven months! Did you take those steers all the way to Chicago?"

"Abilene ain't Arizona," Lane smiled.

"Did the men come back with you?"

"You won't have them on your hands," he said slowly. "They dropped out at spreads along the way. By the time I got to New Mexico I was ridin' solo." Lane's eyes hardened. "I felt like turnin' back and saltin' away every Injun in the Territory, personal, when I heard about Sam."

"Dad went easily, compared to some we've lost. A rifle bullet through the

heart saw to that. I think he was glad to die. He put all he had into the Ox-Bow—money and years. He hadn't the strength to start over again. He felt that the money from the sale of the cattle would just about take care of me."

"Ten thousand should help a little!"

"Handled right, it's all we'll ever need. It's our stake to build something even bigger than the Ox-Bow."

Lane winced. Turning, he looked across at the cottonwood-shaded plaza on which the hotel cornered. "I wanted to talk to you about that, Beth. I'd feel more private talkin' under a tree than with that hotel flunky grinnin' at us."

They found relief from the blaze of the brassy sky in the shade of a magnificent old cottonwood. Across the square a circle of kneeling Mexicans were betting with staccato yells on a cockfight. Drowsy *viejos* sat against the low mud bandstand, smoking in the shade.

A hot breeze ruffled Beth's light summer skirt. Seated on a bench, she rested her head against the trunk of a tree. The deep, square-cut neckline of her dress suggested, in creamy skin, the roundness of firm young breasts.

Her eyes, sultry blue, watched the play of crisp leaves above them. But Lane's first words shattered the peace of the setting for both of them.

"We can't do it, Beth. We can't be married yet. Maybe not for a long time."

The girl caught a breath, her eyes flicking to his face. "You haven't forgotten the plans we made with dad, Lane, before you left? A new ranch house on the Ox-Bow, for the new foreman and his wife?"

"That was when Sam was alive. When he needed me to help him run the outfit."

"Does it change things between you and me, now that he's gone?"

"Not of itself. But it makes a difference that I'm broke and plumb out of a job; that you've got a bigger stake in the bank than any ignorant cowpoke will ever see. Think it would look right to folks for us to be married with things all out o' balance like that?"

Beth was suddenly on her feet, her lips compressed. "Is this your way of getting out of it?" she snapped. "Folks wouldn't think of that."

Lane rubbed his cheek-bone, where the skin was red and swollen. "Some of 'em are already talkin', and us not married yet. That's how-come the shiner. I'm not sayin' you've got to throw away your money or that I've got to have just as much before we tie the knot. But I want to show 'em that I can hold down better than a run-of-the-mine cowprod's job. That was the term Cobb Anson used."

"What are you planning to do?" Beth inquired. "Discover a gold mine?"

"It's not a joke with me," Lane said curtly. "I don't know just what I will do. I went through some country in New Mexico that sorta suited me. Wild cattle by the thousands; but almost as many Mescalero Injuns as cattle. Still, I may build me a herd up there and mebbeso bring 'em down here later on. Else bring you there when we get rid of the Injuns."

"I suppose you could do that in another eleven months?"

"Maybe three years," Lane reckoned.

Suddenly Beth's eyes began to sparkle. A challenging smile touched her lips. "All right, cowboy! You want the town to know you aren't marrying me for a soft job. I'm going to give you the hardest job in Arizona! A job they'll hear about clear back to Independence, if you're successful. I'm going to buy Pop Shane's freight line this afternoon—and you're going to run it for me!"

LANE'S hand clamped on her wrist. "Buy that broken-down passel of wagons! And the long-eared shacks o' bones that draw 'em?"

"Call them names, but they're all that keep us from being cut off from civilization completely. The telegraph wires have been down for months. The stage line has been suspended. If Tucson ever gets back on her feet, it will be because someone had the guts to keep that freight line running. It won't be an easy thing to do—but if we win, it'll be worth everything."

"It ain't a woman's job!" Lane protested.

"But I don't have to run the outfit," Beth told him. "I've got you! And don't worry—no one will accuse you of using your influence to get the job. If you'd seen the wagons that rolled out of here in the last year and never came back. . . . The last one went out a week ago. We won't know for a month if it reached Lordsburg."

Lane touched the mail pouch with his boot toe. "You won't have to wait that long. I picked this up near the wagons, where the Apaches dumped it after they discovered they couldn't eat what was inside."

Beth sobered. "Is that the truth?"

"There were four wagons. Skinner and swamper to each, and a guard in the front wagon with the mail. Does that tally?"

Beth's lips lost color, but not their firmness. "That tallies, but it doesn't stop me. Anson has tried to get Pop to sell to him for a few hundred before he's foreclosed. The way he got our place. But Pop wouldn't do it, because I promised to take it over as soon as I had the cash. He'd rather come out with nothing than see Anson get it. Pop Shane and Anson just don't hit it off."

"And what do you think I can do with it if Pop couldn't handle it, and him an old hand?"

"Pop's too old a hand. He hasn't the urge and strength to fight a younger man. There are plenty of young fellows around town who could be talked into joining up. My plan is to make each string a rolling arsenal. After a few raiding parties and Mexican Border-jumpers tackle us, word will get around that the freight is meant to get through. It will mean saving this range from slipping back maybe twenty-five years."

"You don't have to save Tucson all by yourself," Lane said impatiently. "The Army is sending troops any month now. Geronimo is slated for a quick trip to the happy hunting ground. They'll fence the Border with the carcasses of Mexican *bandidos*."

"And what if they delay as they always do? No, Lane. My mind's made up. Will you take the job, or have it bandied about Tucson that Lane Dolan balked at a job because it was too tough? Everyone in the town knows I intended to do this."

Lane's lips twisted wryly, but there was a good-natured quirk in his eyes. "When you put it that way, I'm fair-grounded and three-footed for dehornin'. But there's one consolation. You'll be plumb busted in two months, and we'll be on even terms. It'll be beans and bread for us, without long-sweetenin'."

If you enjoy this hard-punching epic of trail herds heading for market—you'll want to read more of the same calibre. . . . Don't miss "Satan's Trail Drive," by Rod Patterson, in September *.44 Western*, on sale July 18th!

Pop Shane's eyes bugged out on stems when he saw the clinking cascade of gold that poured from the money belt Beth Starr held over his desk in the freight office an hour later. Pop was a doleful-eyed old Scot with a vulture's beak of a nose that dominated his whole face. It made his eyes look like green shoe-buttons shining beneath a hairy gray hedge. Dwarfed his big mouth with its pendulous lower lip, and even tended to draw attention from the ears that were almost as long as those of the animals he had spent his life cussing and praising.

"Don't tax an old man's heart thataway!" he gasped. "Where'd you get 'er, gal?" Pop's eyes found the lanky shape beside Beth, traveled up to the brown, stubbled face. "Cuss yuh, Dolan!"

"Likewise, Pop," Lane grinned.

Beth was sorting the gold pieces into little stacks. "When you're done cussing each other we'll talk business. The cattle brought more than I hoped for, Pop. I'm giving you seven thousand for what you owe the bank, and another five hundred to match what Anson would have paid you for the mortgage. Have you got the inventory made out yet?"

"Don't rush me, gal," Shane muttered. He shook hands briefly with Lane. Then he went to grubbing through drawers and accumulated bills of lading and invoices. He dredged up several sheets of foolscap and squinted over them.

"Here we be. Eighteen wagons, countin' the four that left last week, an' sixty-eight—"

"Make that fourteen wagons," Lane interrupted.

Pop looked up, gazed for a moment steadily into the other's eyes, and bent again to the inventory. "—fourteen wagons," he resumed, unperturbed, "and eighty-eight head o' mules. Not countin' Brushpopper. He led out on the first pay haul I ever made to this hole. He's earned his corn an' hay and I aim to see that he gits 'em." Shane stroked his bony-bridged nose. "Now, then, how you figgering to run this layout?"

Beth told him. "But there ought to be one experienced hand in the company," she finished. "Put 'Pop Shane' down at the bottom of that inventory list. I'm taking you along with the stock."

Pop grumped and stalled, but gratitude put a shine in his eyes. In the end he signed on as strawboss of the freight line.

CHAPTER THREE

Saguaro Tank

THE old Scotchman told Lane something a little later that put the stamp of emergency on the freight run planned for a week from then. Beth had gone to the bank to make the mortgage payment and tie the deal up legally.

"You've got one month to get a mail delivery through before the contract is cancelled. That means it's got to hit Lordsburg in three weeks if it's to make El Paso on time."

Lane shrugged. "If we make it at all, we'll make it by then." He was squatting before the iron safe in a corner of the room with its small barred windows and battered furniture. He tapped a long parchment envelope against his fist.

"Wish them 'Paches had at least tore a corner off this letter of Anson's. Then I'd open 'er with a clean conscience. Ever hear of a greaser named Garces?"

"Only on them letters of Anson's. Come to think of it, Anson done a funny thing last trip. He bought up a lot of block salt Tully Coin had layin' around. Claimed he was aiming to put the Ox-Bow on a payin' basis by making traps at every water hole, with salt lick to help draw the cattle. Come round-up time,

all he'd have to do was shut the gates and he'd have a good percentage of his count under wire—if he ever gits holt of the wire. He had me freight the salt out to Saguaro Tank this last run, and leave it there for his boys to pick up."

Long, hard muscles rose to rib Lane's flat jaw. "Delivery was made, then. I found the wagons southeast of the Tank. How many times before has Anson had some brainstorm like that?"

Pop Shane glanced at him as he licked the cigarette he had just coaxed into being. "Can't tell you that. There's the bills of ladin', though. Grub around in 'em if you think it's worth the effort."

Lane thought so, and for an hour his dark head was bent over the dusty desk. When he looked up, his manner was that of a man who has found something and is not allowing himself to become unduly excited over it.

"Let's keep this under our hats," he said crisply. "I don't want Beth jumping to conclusions, nor Anson to hear about it. These invoices show where Cobb Anson has sent shipments of merchandise four times to be dropped off at Saguaro Tank. I'd like to know how many times a letter to Garces has gone with the same train."

"What would it prove if you did?"

"That Garces was being given the high-sign to pick up whatever your men left out there."

Pop Shane's fingers, slow-bending and gnarled from years of handling the ribbons, picked up the invoices. He read as he shuffled through them. "Forty bales of hay, May eight. June first, four barrels of flour. June twenty-six, twenty crates of canned stuff . . . Cuss it, Dolan, cain't a man stock a new ranch without comin' under suspicion? Saguaro Tank is only six mile from the Ox-Bow. Cheaper for him to have me freight his stuff out there than to haul it himself."

Lane stood up, slapping his flat, curl-brimmed Stetson on his head. "Sure it is, Pop. But tonight I'm going to *pasear* out there and have me a lick of that salt."

♥ ♥ ♥

AT NINE o'clock Lane saddled his pony at Tully Coin's livery. The desert night, warm and mysterious, had stolen from the jagged Santa Cataline hills like a thief wrapped in his dark *zarape* to take the town.

Lane had just ridden through the door when another rider pulled from the shadows. His hand dropped onto the bone handle of his Colt .45 as he curbed his pony's nervous side-jump. Then Pop Shane's dry monotone grated across the darkness.

"We got a curfew ordinance in this town, Dolan. Fellers under fifty ain't allowed out o' the city limits after dark. Me an' Brushpopper are es-cortin' you. *Vámonos!*"

Erect, old Shane sat back against the cantle like a man who has ridden the rough ones in his time. Brushpopper paced along with a high, racking trot. He was a toothless old red jeannette, smaller than a horse but as strong as a bull.

Lane had to spur to catch up with him. He was glad enough to have company on the risky desert ride. What one man's eyes failed to see another's ears might find.

They passed through Old Town. Lane was experiencing again the inexplicable charm this sun-blasted country had for those who cursed but never left it. The barren ugliness of the streets was forgotten. From dark doorways stole the tinkling of guitars in hidden patios, the soft lilt of laughter. The air was a perfume made up of tobacco smoke and the bite of charcoal fires, the heavy odor of smoke-tree blossoms and the aroma of cooking *chili colorado*.

Then another sound came to scatter

the night's dreaminess. Down a side street paralleling theirs rang the quick beat of a running pony. The direction of the sound veered, swung toward them. Lane grunted a word that sent them both into the shadow of an adobe.

A rider flashed out of the darkness, his spurs clinking as they rolled. Lane Dolan had one swift glimpse of a hard, pale face, a long body straining over the neck of the loping pony. But that glance brought a name to his lips: *"Jess Diamond!"*

"Where-at's he a-goin' with water bags tied all over his hoss?" Shane growled.

"Nogales!" Lane's answer was as quick as the stab of his sunset rowels.

He kept to the center of the road, where the dust was deep and soft, muffling the hammer of his mount's iron shoes. Brushpopper came snorting in his dust. That way they reached the fringe of town and saw the white plume of dust where Jess Diamond, Sam Starr's old segundo, was heading through the forest of tall pipe-organ cactus between the low rocky hills of the valley that stretched clear to the Mexican border.

They were a mile out of town before Diamond saw them. The cowboy's saddle gun swung a semaphore as he yanked it from the boot. A bullet tore through the dry brush a second after the stab of yellow flame. Diamond was spurring on before the smash of the shot reached the pursuers' ears.

The whip of warm wind blurred Lane's vision. When the next shot came it was the louder voice of a revolver. Jess Diamond had pouched his single-shot Remington and drawn his Colt. Knowing that, Lane hung back.

Pop Shane's jeannette pounded up. "Cuss you, Dolan!" the freighter bawled. "If it's murder you're brewin', git to your shootin'! If it ain't—"

Another bullet burned the air above his head. Pop ducked. Three more shots screamed by them. Every muscle held ready, Lane Dolan timed his pony's pace for the job ahead. Jess Diamond took pains with that last shot. It came after a long wait, the spinning lead screaming off a rock beneath Lane's horse. The pony jumped like a cat and went off in a series of weaving bucks.

Up ahead, Diamond was feverishly punching the hot empties from his gun. Lane's chance was here, and there was need to hurry. To stop the boogered sorrel's pitching he used a bronc rider's trick: He spurred a circle on one side and yanked the opposite rein as the animal came down, throwing it off balance. After a moment he gave it the bit and it shot ahead.

Lane's fingers slipped the rawhide tie-thong from the horn of his saddle. With a few twirls he built a loop in the hard-twisted manila. His chattering spurs drew from the sorrel all the speed in its pounding hoofs. He was looming up on Jess Diamond before the segundo sensed it. His throw was hard and flat. He took his dallies as the cow pony stopped, bracing for the shock.

A yell burst from Diamond. His body hit the end of the rope and he was torn from the saddle. He came down in a clump of catclaw, rolled over once, and lay still.

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LANE was bending over him when Shane arrived, his finger's exploring the ramrod's pockets. From the inside of Diamond's shirt, finally, he extracted a billfold. He took an envelope from this and held it up.

"Didn't know how hot that letter was," he grinned. "Anson was sending a copy by his private Pony Express. The nice part about this—" Lane flipped the blade of a knife—"is that it ain't U. S. mail and I can open it."

Laying the missive against the flat of his thigh, he carefully slid the thin blade along under the flap. The glue was old, dried from the moisture-stealing property of the desert air, and it readily cracked away.

Lane read aloud: "Garces: Letter of last week held up. Repeating: Job I mentioned is set to break before long. I've helped you plenty. Now, my friend, it's turnabout. I've already furnished the wherewithal. *Pues, ándale, amigo!*"

"This Garces must be a wet cattle artist, I reckon." Shane seemed uninterested in the message. "Sounds like Anson's been lookin' into too many bottles. Don't make sense."

Scowling, Lane replaced the letter and carefully moistened and pressed the flap. The ancient glue held. He put envelope and bill-fold back. Then he did something that pulled Shane's brows together. He took from the ramrod's pockets all the gold and silver that they contained.

"You ain't that hard up!" Pop growled.

Lane said, "I'd like to see that message delivered. Diamond don't need to know we was anything but hold-up men. He couldn't've recognized us. I think we can turn that letter into a good piece of business for us. But part of the job is out at Sagüaro Tank, and we ain't gettin' there fast this-away."

They reached the Tank sometime after midnight. Dismounting, they passed warily through the thick stand of giant pipe-organ cactus to where, at the foot of a red butte commanding a brushy knoll, a natural rock dam penned brackish water. Stage-coach and jerk-line freight had watered here for nearly half a century. Almost hidden by the brush now, the crumbling mud walls of an old relay station showed whitely through gaps in the stark branching.

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Lane stood in the doorway. The place was roofless. In the gloom a stack of fifty-pound salt blocks could be made out in one corner. He headed that way and knelt beside them. He hacked at the hard salt with the long blade of his knife.

Pop Shane swore under his breath when Lane pried a thick slab of yellow-stained salt lick loose and laid it aside. He struck a match. Gleaming eyes stared at the close-ranked layers of linen cartridges packed in bran inside the block.

"Now, who in tophet uses needle guns this day an' age?" Shane muttered. "Them's linen ca'tridges for a' old .50 caliber carbine! Must be thousands!"

Thoughtfully, Lane turned in his fingers one of the big waxed-cloth shells with its huge slug of lead. "I'll tell you who might use them," he breathed. "Mex Border-jumpers. Raiders who prey on our freight wagons and stage-coaches. Anson's backin' 'em, Pop. Likely they rustled pore ol' Sam Starr blind and killed him later on. They've bankrupted you and now they're fixin' to stop Beth."

"No, by God!" Pop's voice was like the crack of an electrode. "We'll send the marshal out here tomorrow."

"We could do that. Or we can do it another way and see Anson salivated, instead of servin' a hitch in Yuma. Show you what I mean . . ."

Pop Shane watched him. Presently he began to grin, and the grin became a wicked chuckle as he hurried to help. "I swow!" he exclaimed. "Fer a peaceable-seemin' feller your ideas are pizen."

CHAPTER FOUR

Border Man

THERE was evidence in the freight office next morning that Cobb Anson had not been entirely inactive the preceding night.

Lane, Beth and Pop Shane gathered to inspect the safe, which had been blown wide open by a small charge of dynamite. A check-up showed the letter missing, and a few unimportant documents probably taken as a red herring. Certain, after last night, of Anson's complicity, Lane had told Beth of the letter Jess Diamond was carrying to Nogales. There was more amusement than chagrin in the eyes that regarded the ruined safe.

"He kin burn his letter and hide the ashes in hell," Shane declared, "and we're still a jump ahead of him. But don't forget this, my lad. For all our fancy finaglin', we ain't chopped the odds against us down to where two tall hombres could spit at each other over 'em. There's still Mexicans and Injuns, and they've got big guns and a tol'able dislike for white men. What makes you think you can get through?"

"I'm banking that we'll find enough men in this town with the guts to gamble against a cold deck. I want at least thirty who savvy how to handle themselves in a scrape. If Anson's going to let Bud Jergen and the boys off, I'd shore like to sign 'em on. But we can't count on them, and they're only a dozen anyhow. I figgered four guards to a wagon, a 'skinner and a swamper. We'll cut loops in every wagon for guns. I'm only takin' five wagons, for a starter."

Lane glanced at Beth. "It ain't going to be cheap. You'll lose money for six months."

"If I can see Anson broken," Beth told him hotly, "I'd gladly lose for a year."

Pop Shane kicked the twisted door of the safe closed, winked at Lane. They had not told the girl of the trap they had laid for Anson, not daring to take a chance on the plan's leaking out.

"Don't you worry none about him," Pop told her. "Where Anson's goin' he'll be a good Injun. Count on it."

But when Lane Dolan set out to build the army that would see the wagons to El Paso or to hell, he ran into a surprise. Tucson men were not eager to risk their lives, even for twenty dollars a week.

He insulted, cajoled, bullied. But he could not erase from their minds the pictures of men and women being brought in by the wagons—mutilated, burned, tortured. He had signed on only seven gents when he ran into Mace Bullman.

Bullman was a red-bearded mountain of a man with a mouth like a cave and the forehead of an ox. He came into the saloon where Lane was haranguing a group of bar hangers-on.

"You Dolan?"

Lane turned to look up at the giant. Bullman wore a lace-fronted buckskin shirt which failed to imprison a forest of curly red hair on his chest. His neck reminded the puncher of that of an old herd bull.

"That's me," Lane told him. "You wouldn't be looking for work—?"

Bullman let his eyes rove contemptuously through the saloon off-scouring. "This the breed o' yaller coyotes I'm going to boss?" he demanded.

"Boss?"

Bullman turned on him. "You don't think Mace Bullman would work as a damn' swamper, do you? Feller, I've train-bossed more strings'n you could shake a blacksnake at. Independence to Santa Fe; Santa Fe to Chihuahua City. Toughest trace a man ever et dust on. But understand this, feller: When them trains roll out I'm always right up there top of the first wagon. Forty a week's my price."

Lane checked the impulse to grin. "I did think I might boss the string, being I'm responsible for it gettin' through."

Bullman gestured impatiently. "I don't give a damned peso who bosses the wagons! I'm talkin' about the *men*. Map out any route you please; I'll git you there. Figger your own stops and layovers. All I ask is you put a whip in my hand and turn me loose on the men."

From his hip pocket Lane pulled a roll of bills and thumbed off eighty dollars. He gave it to Bullman. "Two weeks' pay in advance. We leave as soon as we can build a crew."

"Tomorrow mornin', then."

"Tomorrow! I've only got seven men. I need thirty."

"Fire 'em. I pick my own men. Be at the Congress Bar at nine tonight, and have a roll on you. I allus throw a little party for my men the night before we leave."

Lane stood wordless, watching the bullwhipper crowd through the batwings. Bullman was his man!

IT WAS ironic that Bud Jergen and a dozen other Ox-Bow cowboys should ride into Tucson that night. They were out of work and all broke. At the freight office, where the lanky, freckled Jergen came hunting him, Lane had to explain why he could not hire them. Beth Starr, he said, was already paying thirty men twenty dollars a week. The crew was made up. But Lane Dolan felt worse than Jergen when the cowboy left.

Nine o'clock came, and Lane walked to the Congress Bar. Bullman already had his crew there. It was a boisterous, unshaven, unwashed army, they bellied up to the bar and shouted for straight whiskey. Dolan stood at the end of the bar paying for the rotgut by the round.

Shane, who stood beside Lane, chewed slowly on a twist of tobacco. "Gosh all Friday, did you ever see sech a kennel full o' mongrel cur-dogs?" he marveled. "If them Apaches come up on us from the leeward they'll set right back on their hunkers and back-track. The smell alone will defeat 'em."

"They ain't purty," Dolan admitted, "but they're tough. That's what we was wantin'."

Bud Jergen and the Ox-Bow boys sat morosely drinking beers on credit. At ten o'clock, three men came through the slotted doors out of the warm night. They sat down at a table and watched the hairy-chested pageant. Tom Silver's dark, good-looking face was still bruised from his scrape with Lane. Jess Diamond, back from Nogales yesterday, had brush scratches on his hands and neck and ears. Anson sprinkled salt in his beer and watched with a vacant smile.

Presently Anson got up. There was patent vanity in the way he hitched up his belts and shrugged his shoulders under the Booger Red jacket. Approaching Lane and Pop, he stopped to lean back against the bar.

"You're damned ambitious," he told Lane, "but I'll bet you never make it."

The hard, flat angles of the puncher's face were calculating. "Wish I owned this outfit," he drawled. "I'd bet you a freight line against a ranch that we do."

Pop Shane grinned behind his frazzled mustache. Both Dolan and Anson were basing their confidence on a heap of salt blocks at Saguaro Tank.

Anson's grin was smug. "We ought to be able to rig up some kind of a bet," he said slowly. "Say, for instance—"

He started, staring at the table he had left a moment earlier. Silver was on his feet, gaping at the door. Lane turned hurriedly as a soft voice came from that direction.

"'Uenas tardes, caballeros! Que dicen?"

Into the Ox-Bow owner's face came a sudden mixture of emotions. Amazement, apprehension—then wild terror.

The Mexican who stood holding the batwings back with his hands was tall and lean as a whip. His long legs were encased in tight Chihuahua chaps. His shirt was of white silk and the short *charro* jacket he wore was of scarlet velvet embroidered in silver. The man's hands gripped cocked, silver-mounted revolvers.

Suddenly—so suddenly that the bar was whipped into panic—he let the doors swing to and began firing. But Anson was a second faster. He dived for the floor, dragging his gun out of its shoulder holster. But a new surprise shook him so that he missed the Mexican.

A hail of lead caved in the front windows as guns roared from the dark street. Tom Silver staggered back, shot in the chest. Bullman's voice bawled through the bedlam as he began throwing lead.

Lane dropped with the first volley from the windows. He was stunned, his brain as numb as that of a man in a nightmare. The Mexican who had started it was gone from his post in the doorway. Lane Dolan shot blindly through the doors.

By the gunflame in the street he glimpsed a horde of border men with crossed bandoliers and *jipi* straw sombreros.

A dozen men were down, writhing on the dirt floor when the guns out in the street fell silent. After a moment, from rear alleys came the thunder of retreating hoofs.

CHAPTER FIVE

Treachery

THROUGH the smoke-layered gloom Mace Bullman stumbled to where Lane lay near Cobb Anson on the floor. His deep voice was weighted with concern.

"You hurt, boss?"

Lane glanced up, wondering why Bullman spoke with his face averted. And then he saw that the drover was on one knee beside—Cobb Anson!

The Ox-Bow boss snarled something

under his breath and Bullman started. When he spoke again he had moved closer to Lane.

"I asked if you was hurt, boss," he repeated.

"Only my feelin's." Lane got up, cuffing bar filth from his shirt and levis. He kept his teeth clenched, his eyes lowered, fighting the savage anger that mounted in him against this loud-mouthed traitor. Bullman whacked him on the back.

"By hell, boys," he boomed to the room at large, "it's to saddle we'll be and runnin' these chili-pickin' varmints down!"

"Don't talk like a fool, Bullman." Anson was standing amid half a dozen wounded. "Any man who ventures out of town tonight is asking for a permanent rest in Boothill."

Outside, the street was filling with shouting men trying to find out what had happened. Lamps were being relighted. Tom Silver and two other men were dead. The rest were more or less seriously wounded.

"Who you reckon it was?" Lane asked Anson.

The other turned a rigid glare on him. "I wouldn't know. But, by God, I'll find out before I'm done." Then he left the saloon with Jess Diamond.

A little later, Lane and Pop Shane departed, after fixing the starting time with Bullman. Beth came hurrying from the freight office to meet them.

"Anson's friends dropped up from Nogales to leave their cards," the cowpuncher told her. He put an arm about the white-faced girl as they headed for the office.

"I've been dreading something all day," Beth whispered. "When I heard the guns I knew you'd gone just like dad. Lane, I can't let you do it! We'll go to the law with our story and hope they hang Anson. But I—I can't—"

"That ain't my gal talkin'," Lane grinned. "Mine says, 'You get them wagons through, or *we're* through! You got a name to make for yourself, cowboy!' "

Beth's eyes glistened behind tears. Her lips trembled. "I know. I'll stick to my bargain. But I wish . . ."

Lane lighted a lamp in the hot, dusty little office. "We got faster action on the Saguaro Tank job than I expected," he chuckled. "What we done, Beth, was to fill the salt blocks with water from the

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Tank. By the time Garces got them linen shells—maybe-so today—they weren't worth his chances of heaven. It looked like the double-cross to him.

"Anson—this is the way I savvy it—has been backing him in these raids, furnishin' shells and taking a cut of the spoils. If Garces ain't different from every other Mex outlaw I ever heard of, he's got plans to be a *revolucionista* after he can get together enough powder and guns. It looks that way by the amount of shells Anson was turning over to him. Garces plundered and rustled Anson into ownership of the Ox-Bow. He's got something bigger still on the stove now—the freight and stage lines." Dolan blew his nose noisily, then went on.

"When this town starts to come back, there'll be a fortune for the man who runs the wagons—and that's the way Anson figgers too. He can't afford to have the Army coming in so soon. It'd put this line on a paying basis for you. He'd hired Garces to try to split the column when they cross the desert. Maybe they'd pollute all the water holes; anything to devil 'em, slow 'em down. Now Garces is on the butt. Unless Anson does some tall talkin', he's lost the greaser's help."

Lane touched a match to the quirly he had built while he had been speaking. "But right now we've got another problem to worry us. Bullman. He's on Anson's payroll!"

Shane dropped his pipe. "How you know that?"

"He let it slip in the saloon tonight," Lane gritted. "Called him 'boss' by accident! Now I savvy why he was so eager for his crew to get the job. They're all drawin' pay to clean our plow after we get clear of town!"

Beth sank back into a chair. "Why do we keep fighting him, Lane? What chance have we against his dirty tactics?"

"Fighting like white men—none!" Lane drew a final cloud of smoke from his cigarette and flung the butt into the street. "Now I aim to try a little Injun fighting. I'm going to find Jurgen."

"You going to fire Bullman?"

"What's the use?" Lane clipped. "If Anson knows we're onto that game, he'll plan another. But if he's counting on Bullman to turn the trick, and we take care of the big gent—I reckon we'll get through. See you in the morning, Pop."

♠ ♠ ♠

TUCSON town still slumbered when the wagons began to roll into the dawn light sifting over the adobies. And it was over an almost silent street that Mace Bullman's mighty blacksnake cracked.

Beth Starr stood in the doorway of the freight office, the rose-gold of the sun in her hair, her chin up-tilted. She made a picture Lane took with him in his heart.

Freshly-tarred axles popped and mules brayed. The cursing voices of skinners jangled discordantly to fill the street with a river of sound.

Pop and Lane were silent as they pushed into the desert, threading the close-growing pipe organ cactus. A feeling of loneliness suddenly assailed them. Among all this army of hard-eyed gunmen they were alone.

They nooned it at Cholla Wells, where the mules watered at a muddy spring and the men stretched out under the wagons.

At each man's side was a thirteen-shot Henry. Lane and Pop sat together, their rifles across their laps.

Bullman was bawling at the drovers almost before they had settled in the shade. "The boss says we hit Saguaro Tank before dark, and by God, we'll do it! Catch up, dammit! Stretch out!"

Bullman sat up there like a flaming-bearded devil as they struggled on

through greasewood and *saguaro,* through rocky washes and over low ribs of rock.

Once as Pop Shane and Dolan rode to the brim of a low mesa to scout for Indians, Pop glanced at the wagons below.

"If I was to prophesy I'd say they'll jump us at the Tank. Prob'ly when we're gettin' a drink or unsaddlin', leastwise when our guard is down. You shore Bud and the boys savvied what we want and when we want it?"

"If they didn't," Lane growled, "I'll scorch their hides when we meet up with 'em in hell. Because we've got to do more'n save our own hides, Pop. We've got to get them wagons to Lordsburg!"

Their eyes found the rude rock-pile that was Saguaro Tank, shimmering in the glassy sea of heat-waves. Then, their nerves twanging, they loped back.

The sun slid toward the hills and an evening breeze sprang up, whipping streamers of dust from the hoofs of the mules.

Mace Bullman tooled his eight weary mules through the matted brush, grinning down at the scouts. "Before dark was your orders, and before dark it is. Will we camp beside the tank, or out yonder on the flats?"

"Draw 'em up right here alongside the tank." Lane, avoiding his glance, reined over and slipped the bit on his pony to let it drink.

"You're the boss," Bullman grinned.

Now a spasm of nervousness struck Lane so that his fingers shook. Pop Shane's flesh was gray.

The wagons drew up in formation beside the tank. Yet the guards and drivers came down slowly, their eyes clinging to Lane and Pop.

Mace Bullman, his coiled whip looped over one shoulder, swaggered down the bank. He went down on all fours and buried his whiskered face in the water to drink. As if at a signal, the others mocked his action. Thirty gunmen drank noisily while their eyes held vigilantly on the old man and the lanky puncher.

Mace Bullman's dripping beard left the water. He rocked back. So swiftly then, that even Lane was trapped in mid-move, the skinner bounced to his feet with a shout in his mouth:

"Git 'em, boys! Drop 'em where they stand!"

♥ ♥ ♥

BULLMAN'S sixgun was in his hand as he shouted the order. But it was still unfired when, from the wagons, a second voice scraped across the rattle of cocking guns.

"Yo're the first to go, Bullman, if them boys is touched! Grab air, pronto!"

Lane grabbed Pop Shane by the elbow and dragged him up the bank. He heard Bullman curse; then the freighter flopped down behind a boulder. His shout released the tension that held his men, and guns began to crash as Lane and Pop sought shelter. From the wagons answering Winchesters blasted through the loops. Slugs were horneting about the running pair as they reached Bullman's Number One wagon. They dived inside.

Bud Jergen lay on his belly, firing through a narrow loop hole in the heavy oak sideboard. Two other Ox-Bow punchers sprawled on the floor. Lane gave the lean, sun-burned bronc-stomper the flat of his hand on the back. The Ox-Bow cowboys had left their brush ambuscade to take the wagons while the others drank.

Heavy .44 caliber lead chewed through the boards as the battery of Henrys went into action. Their force was sufficient to blow off the top of a man's head even after penetrating the wood. But Bullman's outfit had only shifting smoke-puffs to aim at. The wagon defenders had much better targets to work on.

And they scored heavily on those targets. The slope was sprinkled with the bodies of freighters who would not return to Tucson to spend their blood money.

The puncher next to Lane groaned and dropped his gun and as Lane turned to help a frown puckered between his eyes. The slug had entered the man's side! No teamster had fired that shot—it had come from the direction of the butte. His questing gaze found no smoke trace in the rimrock cliff. Again he bent to the loop hole.

Through the brush crashed frightened mules, dragging harness that had not been removed when they had been cut loose to drink. Their braying stampede added to the madhouse symphony of yelling men and thundering rifles.

Lane saw a pistol appear over a low mound of red adobe where once a wall had stood. He crossed his sights on the hammer of the gun. As a bearded face came behind the stock, he triggered. The face mushroomed scarlet and disappeared.

The strangeness of the teamster's using a pistol did not strike Lane for a moment. Then he noted the change in the sound of the barrage.

"Pop!" he grunted. "We've got 'em, now! They haven't got shells for those Henrys. We've got all their ammunition right here in the wagons. They're falling back on their sixguns!" He gestured at a case filled with the long metal tubes the repeaters employed for reloading, each crammed with .44 slugs.

Pop chuckled. But the sound turned to a gasp as a rip appeared in his jacket. He clutched his side. "Damn the varmints!" he groaned.

Lane whirled. This time he saw a smoke blossom high on the butte's side. The butt of his rifle slapped his shoulder. He fired; and because the lead did not ricochet he knew it had found a yielding target. A moment later a rifle clattered down among the rocks. Then a man in a Booger Red jacket toppled from a rim and like a bundle of old clothes he bounded off a ledge and crashed into the middle of the tank. Cobb Anson, his dream of glory exploded, lay half submerged in the water.

Pop was breathing hard, but every breath carried a curse. That was the best sign Lane could hope for. There was no time to search for the slug, but temporarily he jammed a twisted neckerchief into the wound to staunch the blood.

For a few moments there was an armistice, as both factions looked at the body in the tank that seemed to have dropped from the clouds. There was a noticeable lack of enthusiasm in the freighters' firing when it resumed again.

Mace Bullman's voice broke through the thunder of rifle and sixgun. "We'll give you your chance to surrender peaceable, Dolan! Night's a-comin'. Then, by hell, we'll git you and throw you, hogtied, into that tank."

"Night's a-comin'," Lane retorted, "but big dark ain't. The moon's already up, waitin' for the sun to set. Ary man leaves his place will be limned against the cliff like an owl on the moon. Come tomorrow and high noon, you jaspers will have a powerful thirst. We've got all the water bags in here with us. I'll make you the same proposition you made us, Bullman. Pitch out your hardware!"

♦ ♦ ♦

TO that, logic permitted Bullman no answer. Silence flowed into the dusky bowl. Suddenly Bullman's ponderous body lunged from the shelter. He raced for the brush at a crouch.

Lane's gun followed him. A dozen other freighters now broke from cover and trailed the red-bearded giant.

"You're beggin' for it!" Lane's shout was like the crack of a gun. "Don't make up drop you like rabbits, Bullman!"

Bullman threw down without slowing,

his .45 making an orange slash across the darkening ground. The bullet struck so close to Lane that for an instant he was blinded by a spray of splinters.

Mace Bullman had sprung the trap under himself. From the wagons poured a leaden noose that tightened down with him in the center. He stiffened, arching his back, his hands pressing against his thighs. Then he slowly wilted to the ground and died.

Five more wagon men broke stride. As they fell, the others stopped and turned hurriedly to face the wagons. Their guns clattered at their feet. Out of shrubs and from behind cutbanks filtered the ragged remnants of Cobb Anson's bushwhack army. Anson was dead. The cause was forgotten. They were ready and eager to quit. . . .

Lane saw to Pop Shane's wound while the others disarmed the teamsters and started them, shirtless and barefoot, on the road back—a road they would never forget. His probing knife blade found the slug in a hole that ended in the tough muscle of Pop's hip. He cleansed the wound with brandy and sweet oil and bound it.

Until now Lane Dolan had not had time to realize that it was over. The octopus that had been strangling Tucson had been torn loose. For the hard-hit Territory town there was a long road ahead, and a hard one. But it was one where courage and fight were to be at a premium, and the man who possessed those qualities could climb as far as he chose.

No less heart-warming to Lane was the realization that the barrier between him and Beth had been erased as a puff of smoke is dissipated by the wind. But the wind that had scattered it had been generated by spinning lead.

He tried to lay Pop Shane back on a tarp, but the long-nosed freighter sat up with an oath. "I ain't dead yit, damn yuh!" he swore. "What the hell you tryin' to do with me?"

"But you're leanin' awful hard against them pearly gates," Lane countered. "You're headin' back in one of the wagons, old-timer, to where you'll get the proper care and rest."

"Rest, hell! I ain't seen one of my wagons roll into Lordsburg in a year, and I'm going to be there when it happens. I used to own this line, young feller, and I'm a-goin' to work my way back where I was once before I hang up my damned whip."

"Maybeso that won't take as long as you think," Lane said. "There's an orphaned ranch I'm thinkin' of that will take some managin'. Cows are my line, not jerk-line wagon strings. Me and Beth are moving out to the Ox-Bow again. Drop around some time, pardner — when you and Brushpopper are in off a run! We'll be glad to see you."

THE END

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THE GUN-CUB'S TURN TO HOWL

By GUNNISON STEELE

Young Kirby Grant had never tried robbing a bank before, but he was willing to learn. For, if the owlhoot suited Yuma Parr, his white-whiskered benefactor, it was good enough for him - - to the end of his new-found saddlemate's trail!

KIRBY GRANT shivered, and not altogether from the chill wind that swept the bottomlands. The river made a low, whispery sound in the darkness, and the campfires shone redly on the faces of the three men who huddled over a greasy blanket on the ground, playing poker.

There was Cougar Madden, a huge, tawny-eyed, hawk-faced man; Modoc Jeo Naab, wiry, dark, thick-lipped, with the naked violence of his uncertain ancestry plain in his sooty eyes; and the Dude, tall, handsome, soft-spoken, but quick-tempered and deadly with the black guns he wore. Killers, these three—men who rode always with the knowledge that a noose awaited their necks if ever they were caught.

Kirby Grant watched their deft fingers flip greasy cards, and listened to their soft voices, alert always for any new sound out there in the thickets. Barely seventeen, lithe, dark-haired, bitter-eyed, he sat with his back to the bole of a tree. The Dude hadn't mistreated

To Kirby, fighting the rearing horses toward the bank, it seemed that a hundred guns were roaring at once.

him. But Kirby hated Madden and Modoc Joe. From the first, their sneers and threats had made life miserable for him. Except for Yuma Parr, maybe they would have killed him before this.

A stronger gust of wind snaked along the river. The wind in the trees, and the whispering water, had a weird, portentous sound.

Modoc Joe said suddenly, "Somebody's comin'!" The three got to their feet and faded like skulking wolves back into the shadows. Kirby followed.

He thought, "That'll be Yuma," and felt relief.

There was a click of shod hoofs against rock, and a horseman entered the red circle of firelight. He was a rawboned, powerful man with whitening beard and hair and mild blue eyes—Yuma Parr, outlaw, with a small fortune in bounty money on his head. By cold courage and the lightning speed of his guns, he had ruled some of the toughest outlaw gangs west of the Missouri, and his name was spoken with awe by longrider and lawman alike.

Yuma Parr dismounted and moved close to the fire. He grinned at Kirby as he came with the others from the shadows.

"You all right, button?"

"Sure," Kirby said. "But I was worried about you, you been gone so long."

"I had to be sure." Yuma untied a package from his saddle. "And I had to wait till dark, to rustle this grub. First thing, we'll eat."

It was canned food, mostly. Cougar Madden and Modoc Joe wolfed their helpings. The others ate more slowly, but just as eagerly, for they'd been without food for almost two days.

His mouth bulging, Madden asked, "What about Windigo?"

"Looks all right," Yuma Parr said slowly. "The bank, I heard, is gutty with money. Been no stick-ups around here lately, and nobody's expectin' any. The sheriff's outta town, over in the next county. Be gone for a couple days. Looks easy."

"Dynamite looks innocent, too," murmured the Dude.

"Scared, Dude?" Modoc Joe sneered.

Softly, his eyes bleak, the Dude said, "Not of rattlesnakes, Modoc—nor you. You talk too much."

Yuma stepped quickly into the breach. "Shut up, both of you. Whether we like it or not, we've got to take the chance. We've got to have money, for grub for ourselves and our broncs. We can't be losin' time, waitin' for dark so somebody can sneak into town and break into a store. Nick Hawn's cut our sign. You all know that, and he ain't far behind."

"I can't savvy you, Yuma," Madden grunted. "This Nick Hawn is just a man—"

"And a U.S. Marshal," Yuma added. "I'd rather have a dozen posses on my backtrail than Nick Hawn. So we've got to take a chance on that Windigo bank tomorrow. I've got it figured out. We'll ride into town at noon, when everything's quiet, but we won't ride in together. Dude, you and Modoc Joe will go first, and Madden will follow five minutes later. Kid, you still want to act a damn fool and ride with us tomorrow?"

Kirby said quickly, "Sure. I'm one of the gang, ain't I?"

"You ain't, not yet," Yuma denied. "You won't be, till you've helped us pull a job. You could wait here—"

"No! I'm ridin' wherever you boys do."

Yuma Parr nodded slowly, "Well, all right. Then me and you will go last. Across the street from the bank is a barber shop. Madden, you'll take your stand there and cover us. Me, Modoc and the Dude will go to the bank. Dude, you line 'em up, and me and Modoc'll do the rest."

"What about the kid?" Modoc asked.

Yuma said levelly, "The button will stay in the alley, with the horses. It'll be his job to have 'em ready for a quick get-away, if somethin' goes wrong. Everybody sabe?"

Silently, the men nodded.

Later, Kirby Grant lay sleepless in his blankets a long time, thinking hard thoughts. Tomorrow, for the first time, he would really ride outside the law. He would be a wanted man, maybe with a price on his head, like Yuma, Modoc Joe and the others. There would be countless other nights like this, skulking in river bottoms and the badlands, listening to the lonely whisper of the wind; days of peril and hardship, probably with an unmarked grave of shame at the trail's end. But it was too late now to turn back. . . .

♥ ♥ ♥

ANXIOUSLY, Kirby peered from the alley mouth. Over there across the street he could see Cougar Madden's huge figure leaning with assumed carelessness against the striped barber post. Mid-day silence held the town of Windigo. The dusty street was deserted, save for Madden and a few horses at hitchracks.

Sweat was dripping over Kirby's face, but he caught himself shivering as he thought of his part in this grim business. Once he had seen a man hanged.

It seemed as if Yuma, Modoc Joe and the Dude had been in the bank a long time . . . Then it happened!

A gunshot blasted, sending crashing waves of sound racketing among the false-fronted buildings. Then another shot, and another. Quick alarm clutched with icy fingers at Kirby's heart. Something had gone wrong!

He glanced from the alley again. Cougar Madden had a gun in one hand, was motioning with the other for him to bring the horses from the alley. But already Kirby was crowding the horses toward the street. By that time the gunfire had increased to a crescendo of fury. Ropes of smoke and flame lashed out from doorways and windows. The high, shrill scream of lead beat maddeningly at his eardrums.

He gained the street. The horses, frightened by the roaring guns, started to whirl and rear. Desperately he fought to prevent them from becoming entangled, at the same time darting a glance along the street.

He saw a man stumble backward through the bank doorway, as if a blast from a shotgun had blown him into the street. It was Modoc Joe. Modoc Joe rolled over, rose to his hands and knees, and swayed back and forth for a space. Then he eased down into the dust and lay still.

Appalled, his young face gone white, Kirby Grant watched. Cougar Madden was stalking stiff-legged across the street, the gun in his hand kicking and blasting. Kirby's gaze swiveled back to the bank.

Another man leaped through the doorway. The Dude! The Dude was clutching a bulging leather bag in one hand, and a reckless, bitter smile twisted his handsome brown features. Yuma Parr came next, a long-barreled gun in each hand, his craggy face grim as he flashed a glance along the street toward Kirby. Yuma leaped over Modoc Joe's still figure, and he and the Dude started running in great bounds toward the horses.

To Kirby, fighting the rearing horses toward the bank, it seemed that a hundred guns were roaring at once. The snarling chorus of gunfire was a steady, frightening din in his ears. A deadly hail of lead raked the street before the bank.

The Dude was out ahead, running with prodigious leaps, like a tawny panther. Yuma Parr came less swiftly, his boots stirring geysers of dust, his eyes fixed on

Kirby Grant. But it was the Dude who faltered first. Halfway between the bank and the mounts, he stopped suddenly. He dropped his gun and stood motionless a moment, feeling aimlessly over his chest. Then he turned, started walking aimlessly back the way he had come, his eyes on the ground.

Abruptly, after a few steps, the Dude slumped to the ground. He lay there, staring unseeingly at the blazing sky, the bulging leather case still clutched in his fingers.

Yuma knew that the Dude was beyond help. He came on, smoke curling snakishly from his gun-muzzle. But, thirty feet from the horses, Yuma stumbled. He went to his knees.

Instantly, Kirby was out of the saddle. He heard Yuma yell, "Dammit, button, get back on that hoss!"

But Kirby leaped to Yuma Parr's side, helped him to his feet and toward the mounts.

"You hit bad, Yuma?" he panted.

Yuma grunted, "Just my leg. You dumb yearlin', I'd oughta wrap this gun-barrel about your head. . . ." But there was fierce pride in his eyes as Kirby Grant helped him up to the saddle of his big dun.

Kirby flung into his own saddle, at the same time looking about for Cougar Madden. He saw the big killer, sprawled face-down in the dust, gray wisps of gunsmoke still curling from the muzzle of his gun.

There was a cold, leaden feeling in Kirby's stomach. Madden, Modoc Joe, the Dude—all dead!

Yuma Parr growled, "Cut loose from them nags!"

Suddenly, then, they were pounding along the street toward its upper end. The gunfire slackened behind them, and they were in the clear, except for a lone horseman coming swiftly along the trail at the edge of town. He was a runty, homely little old man, his arms flapping comically as he spurred his skinny roan toward the sounds of battle.

He swerved the roan aside as he saw Yuma and Kirby bearing down upon him, and with amazing speed a huge gun appeared in his hand. But Yuma's gun, already leveled, blasted. The running roan stumbled, crashed headlong to the ground, flinging the runty rider twenty feet over its head.

The pint-sized oldster hit the earth solidly. He writhed a moment, digging in the dust with his fingers, obviously stunned. By the time he was able to sit up, and had found his gun, Kirby and Yuma Parr were out of range.

♠ ♠ ♠

WINDIGO, with its roaring guns and snarling lead, was behind them, and they rode wildly across the prairie toward the purple line of hills bristling along the northern horizon.

Bewildered, Kirby asked, "What happened?"

"A trap," Yuma said, tight-lipped. "Somehow, they'd found out we aimed to raid the bank. The sheriff bein' out of town was a blind. They didn't aim to capture us—they aimed to kill us all, like they did Modoc, Madden and the Dude."

"But how did they catch on?"

"Likely somebody recognized me in town yesterday, and guessed what I was up to. We was worth just as much dead as alive. I ain't kickin'. That's what gents like us have got to expect, sooner or later."

Kirby swallowed hard, still a little stunned by the events of the last few minutes. Yuma Parr had a bullet in his thigh; his trouser leg was soaked with blood, his craggy face was lined with pain.

"That leg—can't I do something?"

"We cain't stop," Yuma said jerkily.

"A sheriff's posse'll be foggin' on our trail."

"We've got a good start, and our broncs are fresh," Kirby ventured. "We can out-run 'em."

Yuma said grimly, "I ain't worried about a sheriff's posse. But that runty, ugly little gent whose hoss I shot—that was Nick Hawn, button."

Nick Hawn . . . that name was known and feared by law-breakers over half a dozen states. Tireless, unrelenting, his hatred for outlaws almost a legend, it was said that U.S. Marshal Nick Hawn never quit a trail until the man he wanted was captured or dead. For the last six months he had been trailing Yuma Parr, never quite catching up with him—until today. They might out-distance posses, might cross county lines, but there would still be Nick Hawn.

Miles slid under drumming hoofs. Their mounts were powerful, fast; no sign of pursuit showed on their backtrail. They reached the foothills, and there paused briefly beside an icy little stream where they bathed Yuma's smashed leg. The wound, still bleeding badly, was six inches above his knee. The bullet was still in his flesh.

"Slug needs to come out," Yuma said. "But we got no time, no way to do it. Doc Bean's my only chance."

"Who's Doc Bean?"

"He's got a whiskey station over on the Chilcot. He'll dig this slug out, give us grub and maybe fresh broncs, if we can get there. It's a good fifty miles to Doc Bean's place. And Nick Hawn won't be sleepin'."

Kirby bandaged Yuma's leg the best he could, then they rode on. Even when night came they didn't stop, not for a long time. Finally Yuma called a halt, and they tried to sleep. At dawn Yuma's face was grim and haggard. Kirby guessed that his gaunt body was racked by excruciating pain.

The old outlaw seemed moody and harassed by doubt. "I'd oughta be hoss-whipped for gettin' you into this, kid."

"You didn't get me into it," Kirby denied.

"You ain't bad like me, like Modoc and Madden and the Dude was. I oughtn't to have let you ride with us yesterday. I ain't even fit'n for you to talk to."

Kirby said scornfully, "Hell, Yuma—how do you figure that? You're the only man that ever treated me like I was human. All my life I been kicked about, like I was a dog. The fever took my daddy and ma when I was two years old. After that, my Uncle Jeb treated me worse'n he would one of his hounds. I stood it long as I could. About a year ago I up and run away, takin' a hoss and saddle which he claimed belonged to him. He tried to have me arrested and took back, to work and slave for him, but I got away.

"I tried to get jobs, but folks just grinned and said to come back when I growed whiskers. I got hungry, had to beg and steal scraps of food, like a sheep-killin' dog. I got desperate. I was about ready to take my gun and rob somebody, to keep from starvin', when I run across you and the others that night."

Yuma nodded, his mind reaching back a month to the night when a ragged, half-starved youngster had ridden into the red circle of firelight where four wanted men squatted. But for Yuma, Modoc Joe and the others would have killed him then and there.

"You filled my belly with grub, got me some decent clothes," Kirby went on earnestly. "You didn't want me to stay with the gang, but when I kept pesterin', you said I could. You taught me a lot. You stood between me and the others, when they wanted to kick me about, maybe kill me. You showed me how to cover a trail so it would fool law-trail-

ers. You showed me lots of things."

"But I never said it was smart to be an outlaw, did I?"

"No," Kirby admitted. "You said only fools ride outside the law. You tried to get me to leave, get an honest job, before the law put a price on my head."

"It still stands," said Yuma. "Kid, I want you to promise me somethin'—that if you get outta this scrape with a whole skin you won't ever ride outside the law ag'in."

"It's too late—"

"Ain't too late," Yuma Parr denied. "Not many saw you back there in Windigo. They was too busy tryin' to down me and the others. Likely nobody would recognize you. You saw what happened to the others back there. Sooner or later, it happens to all of us—a bullet in the back, or a hangnoose. You promise?"

"I promise," Kirby said solemnly.

Yuma smiled then, and said, "Well, let's ride."

They went on. They rode most of that day, except for brief pauses; rode slowly now, for Yuma's unattended leg was swollen and inflamed, his face seamed and gray. They kept to ravines and wooded country, when they could, but made small attempt at covering their backtrail. The thing, Yuma said, was to get to Doc Bean's place over on the Chilcot.

At sundown Yuma was weak and feverish, his wounded leg swollen tight in his boot. They stopped beside a tinkling stream, and for a long time Yuma Parr soaked his foot and leg in the icy water. Then they slept; but sometime in the night Yuma roused the boy and they took to the saddle again. Dawn found them amid low brown hills where the hoofbeats of their mounts were flung back from corridors and walls of granite. That morning they stuffed themselves on wild berries, and Kirby got sick, but they rode on. They'd seen no sign of posses.

But they weren't safe. Nick Hawn was back there, his nose to the ground like a trailing hound. Maybe he was close, maybe not. But his presence back there, to Kirby, was real and disturbing.

At mid-day Yuma said with satisfaction, "Reckon Doc Bean'll have company 'long about sundown."

THE last red banners were draining from the darkening sky when they halted on the banks of the Chilcot. On the far bank Kirby Grant could

see the low dark bulk of a building, a yellow splotch of light showing at a window. He could see the ferry cable stretching a few feet above the turgid, whispery water. And there, dangling by a rope from a tree limb, was a rusty wagon tire, and a sledge hammer on the ground. You banged on the tire with the sledge when you wanted the queer character known as Doc Bean to pole the ferry across for you.

Kirby took the sledge and swung it three times against the wagon tire. Then they sat down to wait. A chill wind blew along the river, and the water made a low, restless sound in the shadows. They saw a man carrying a lantern come from the building over there, and down to the water's edge. A moment later they heard a creaking as the ferry started to cross the stream.

Yuma's voice was low in the dusk. "I been thinkin,' younker. I've got a brother over in Oregon. He's got a button, just about your age; and a girl, a couple years younger, as purty a trick as I ever saw. They're swell folks, honest and respected, not like me. Folks look up to 'em. How'd you like to go to Oregon to live?"

The word had a magic sound. Kirby said, "I'd like it fine. But . . . what about you?"

"I'll make out," Yuma said quickly. "After Doc fixes my leg, we'll separate. You hit for Three Rivers, Oregon, and ask for John Parr. Tell him I sent you. He'll treat you swell, give you an honest job on his ranch. Maybe, sometimes, I'll drop in on you and brother John. How does that sound?"

Kirby grinned, envisioning the picture Yuma had painted. "Sounds swell," he said.

"Whatever happens, you'll do it?"

"I'll sure do it."

The ferry had been coming on at a snail's pace, its pulleys creaking and groaning, and now its blunt end touched the landing place a few yards away. Yuma and Kirby came down to the water's edge, leading their tired horses. Doc Bean stepped from the ferry, holding the lantern high, trying to see who his customers were. The murky light etched his short, pot-bellied figure, his slovenly clothes, his shrewd, bearded features.

Without surprise, he said, "Howdy, Yuma."

Yuma said, "Could you fix me and the button up with some grub, Doc—and maybe some hosses, and dig a slug outta my leg? We're broke."

"Reckon so, Yuma. Where's Modoc, Madden and the Dude?"

"They won't be ridin' this way no more," Yuma said briefly.

Doc Bean said no more. Yuma and Kirby led their horses onto the ferry, and Doc poled the craft away from the bank to where the current could catch it. Kirby could feel and smell the river; it was quiet, yet alive with restless noises, with the wind blowing in strong gusts over the darkening water.

The river man appeared disinterested in them. Doc Bean, rumor said, had once been a respected and accomplished surgeon in a big eastern city, until whiskey and a woman ruined him. Now he pretended to make an honest living from his river supply station, but he fooled nobody. Usually, the men who stopped at Doc's place were outlaws. But Doc Bean catered to honest man and outlaw alike. He sold whiskey, food or horses to long-riders—if they had the money to pay—and kept his mouth shut. He did the same for honest men.

Doc Bean took no part in the endless fight between the law and lawless. He had friends on both sides, and neither side expected aid or opposition beyond a certain point.

Kirby helped Yuma up the steep river bank and into the post. The combination bar and storeroom was big, with a pine

bar extending across one end and with rude tables and chairs scattered about. Doc Bean put water on to heat. Then he rolled up his sleeves, took a deep drink from a stone jug, and Yuma Parr did the same.

Doc Bean produced a black satchel, revealing an assortment of gleaming instruments. He pushed Yuma Parr back on a table and cut away his trouser leg. He grunted, "You fool, this should have been attended to two days ago."

Yuma grinned twistedly. "No could do. Nick Hawn's on our backtrail."

Doc said, "Nick Hawn, eh?" as if that was explanation enough.

He pulled at the jug again, and went quickly about the work at hand. Yuma's face turned chalk-white, and he writhed on the table, but he made no sound. Kirby watched, feeling sick and weak.

Yuma must have guessed that, for he said jerkily, "Kid, you—'tend to—hosses. Put 'em in corral down by—river. Feed and water 'em."

Kirby left the room, stumbling a little. He led the horses to a pole corral over near the river, unsaddled them and put them inside. The horses, like Yuma and Kirby, were exhausted. He found grain in a shed nearby. Then he took a five-gallon pail and carried water from the river to a trough in the corral.

It was while he was dipping the pail the second time that he suddenly froze motionless, quick wariness stabbing at him. He crouched, straining eyes and ears. The water made a low, sibilant sound in the night. But there was a different sound . . . And then he saw it—a shape out there on the river.

♦ ♦ ♦

THE moving thing drew swiftly toward the bank, at a point fifty feet from the spot where Kirby crouched. A swimming horse! There was a splashing as the horse left the river. Then, limned briefly against the sky, Kirby saw the pint-sized rider—Nick Hawn!

He backed stealthily away from the water, started at a crouch-run back toward the post building. But he saw he was too late to warn Yuma. Nick Hawn was between him and the building. Kirby tugged the old Peacemaker from his belt, undecided whether to cut down on Nick Hawn, or fire a warning shot.

He did neither, for just then the rider dismounted and went swiftly toward the lighted doorway. Berating himself for his indecision, Kirby circled the log structure and reached an open rear door. He went through, found himself in what was obviously a kitchen. A second door, slightly ajar, opened into the storeroom.

Again, he knew he was too late. He heard a drawling voice: "Howdy, Yuma. I wouldn't reach for that gun."

Then Yuma Parr's calm voice: "Howdy, Nick. Looks like I was expectin' you, but I forgot most ever'thing I ever knew when Doc started diggin' after that slug."

"I see you gentlemen are acquainted." That was Doc Bean. "That being the case, you don't mind if I have a taste from this jug?"

Kirby Grant felt numb and confused. Life or death hung in the balance, yet these three men might have been talking about the weather. He eased cautiously forward, the gun still in his hand, till he could see into the other room.

Nick Hawn stood just inside the front doorway, his runty, warped figure soaked from the waist down, the gun in his hand covering Yuma Parr. Yuma's leg had been bandaged; he sat erect on the table, hands folded in his lap, his gun on the table beside him.

Nick Hawn didn't look like a gun-cat marshal as he stood there. He looked gentle, almost apologetic. He said, "It's been a long, hard game, Yuma. But this

is the last pot, and looks like I take it."

"Looks like," Yuma nodded. He sat a moment, head on one side, as if listening. "Well, a man makes mistakes, and he's got to expect to pay for 'em. A long time since we was buttons together up on the Musselshell, ain't it, Nick?"

"Forty years, Yuma," the lawman murmured. "We got into a lot of kid scrapes. Once, I remember, you snaked me from the river with a wet rope when the ice broke under me."

Yuma chuckled. "And you paid me back, a few weeks later, when you roped a wild stud that was about to tromp me."

Doc Bean had gone behind the bar with his jug. Both Yuma Parr and Nick Hawn knew that they could expect nothing from him; he wouldn't lift a finger to help or hinder either of them.

Kirby Grant could feel sweat running over his face. He wasn't deceived by the soft, seemingly friendly voices in the next room. He sensed the deadliness of what was happening. Yuma had been caught flat-footed. He, Kirby, was all that stood between Yuma and a hangnoose.

He had to rescue Yuma—*had* to. He owed Yuma that much. He reached out a hand, ready to fling open the door.

Nick Hawn had Yuma's gun now, and was holstering his own weapon as he backed away. Yuma was gunless, helpless. But he didn't seem worried.

"Kids do crazy things," he said. "They get queer ideas. Take me and you, now, up there on the Musselshell. You always wanted to be a lawman. But me, I figured owlhooters led thrillin', romantic lives. I thought it was smart to fool the law. Nothin' bad, at first—just enough to send a deputy sheriff huntin' me. I got rattled, and killed him. Then I saw how crazy I'd been all along. But it was too late. I lined out into the badlands."

Kirby thought, *Nick Hawn's not the kind to cave without a fight. I'll have to kill him.*

"It's always too late, when you've killed a man," Yuma was saying softly. "Then you're doomed, whether the law catches up with you or not. Most younkers, if they had another chance, would go straight." Yuma chuckled again. "Damned if I ain't preachin' a reg'lar sermon. I ain't kickin'. I wanted to be an outlaw, and I've been one. I deserve to hang a dozen times—but I'm damn glad I ain't got but one neck to break!"

"I wanted to be a lawman," Nick Hawn said. "And now, after forty years, we've come to this. The law's bigger than both of us. The law told me to catch you, and take you back to a hangrope, and I've got to do it. Nothing can change that."

Kirby Grant smashed open the door, leaped through, the gun out-thrust. "I aim to change it!" he snapped. "Reach up, feller! I'm takin' your prisoner!"

♥ ♥ ♥

FOR ten seconds nobody moved or spoke. Marshal Nick Hawn hunkered forward a little, braced on bandy legs, his thin, bearded face expressionless. Doc Bean fumbled for the jug. Yuma Parr stared.

Then Yuma asked, "Doc, who is this fire-spoutin' button? What in tarnation's he tryin' to do?"

"Get his gun, Yuma," Kirby said swiftly. "We're foggin' outta here."

Yuma shook his head. "I ain't goin' nowhere, not with a crazy, wild-eyed kid I never saw before. How do I know you don't aim to gun me in the back?"

Kirby didn't savvy that. He darted a glance at Yuma. Yuma still sat with folded hands.

Softly, Nick Hawn said, "It's no go, younker. I'm keepin' my prisoner. To get him, you'll have to kill me."

"I'll kill you, if I have to," Kirby said desperately. "Yuma, get his—"

Yuma said angrily, "You ain't killin' nobody. Kid, what the hell you mean bustin' in here with that gun? Go on back to your ma."

Nick Hawn stirred. "I don't sabe this. Yuma, you say you don't know him?

"Never saw him before in my life!"

The gun-butt burned hot against Kirby's wet palm. Now, suddenly, he savvied what was happening. Yuma Parr was lying, to save him. Yuma could have freedom, but he was throwing it away, choosing a hangrope, because he didn't want Kirby Grant to kill a man. *It's too late, when you've killed a man. . . .*

Nick Hawn knew Yuma was lying. He's seen Kirby back there in Windigo. He said gently, "Kid, you've got just half a minute to shoot, or go out that door."

"Move, and I'll let you have it," Kirby said hotly. He appealed to Yuma. "You gone loco? We'll tie this gent up, and line out. That'll give us a good start. We'll ride so far he won't ever find us—"

Hawn's voice took on a steely edge. "Time's about up, kid. What'll it be, fight or hunt the door?"

That prodding, relentless voice kindled the fires inside Kirby. His trigger-finger tightened.

"I'll show you what it'll be!" he spat.

Yuma Parr moved then. He got from the table and hobbled quickly toward Nick Hawn, getting directly between Kirby and the runty marshal. He held out his wrists to Nick Hawn.

"You can put the bracelets on, Marshal. Danged if I wouldn't rather take my chances on a rope than on a crazy kid with killin' on his brain."

"That's hoss sense," the marshal said, and snapped handcuffs on Yuma's wrists. "Well, we'll start back now. We'll ride a good ways down river tonight!"

Then, not looking again at the white-faced boy, they went out the door.

Kirby opened his lips to call after Yuma Parr, then closed them. His shoulders sagged as the fierce passion ran out of him. He looked puzzledly at the gun in his hand—and, like it was something unclean, let it fall to the floor. He stood a moment, head on one side, as if listening. He straightened slowly, murmuring something that sounded to Doc Bean like "Oregon." Then he went out into the night.

Doc Bean sighed, reaching for the stone jug. Many dark trails had found their sordid endings here in this very room. He had not been paid for services rendered, but there was compensation in the knowledge that where one trail had ended, another had begun.

Yuma Parr had worn the outcast brand. The boy, whose trail stretched new and shining before him, had not. And Doc Bean knew that now he never would.

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A sweeping novel of courage and death on the frontier railroads

The shouts and shots sent him away at a killing gallop.

CHAPTER ONE

Squatters' Deadline

JIM DURKIN frowned as he went over the figures in the books before him. It was taking more money than even he had imagined would be needed to keep the spur track creeping across Sweetwater Valley. Five thousand dollars above the allotted amount had been spent, and the steel was just reaching Satan's Wash, the halfway mark; and the tunneling of Rocky Point was only three-

★ STEEL TRACKS THROUGH HELL ★

By ROLLAND LYNCH

One more delay to the Sweetwater Valley railroad builders would smash every rancher backing the pool. Yet Jim Durkin, who'd learned the truth of the end-of-track 'accidents' that were ruining his neighbors, had to brand himself a liar, an ingrate and a double-dealing traitor —if he hoped to save them!

quarters done. But who could have foretold the labor strike for higher wages just after the spur had begun? Who had foreseen the derailing of the work train in Summit Pass, that had scattered ties and rails over the mountain slope, shattering them beyond use?

It was things like that which had drained the coffers of this community-financed project. Jim figured he was

partially to blame. He hadn't had much experience along these lines. He had pleaded to hire a bonafide engineer, but the valley had insisted on him being head of construction. Now, if there was more trouble, the Sweetwater ranchers would have to take another hitch in their money belts.

The panting of the work train sounded clearly through the new, resinous-smelling walls of his office, and his frown deepened. What was the work train doing in at this time of the day?

Doleful Dobbs burst through the door with an answer to the question: "There's hell to pay at track's end. Some nesters have a fence thrown across the right of way."

Jim surged from his chair and turned to the map tacked to the wall. Tracing the line with a lean brown finger, he said darkly, "That's John Amster's Bar A Bar range. They've no right there."

"There's six of 'em making it stick, with rifles," said Dobbs.

Jim took his belt and gun down from the wall peg. Jamming his hat on his head, he said tightly, "Come on," and led the way from the office.

The two crossed the station platform, carefully avoiding the pitch bubbles being boiled from the new wood by the Wyoming sun. They went up the tracks and stepped onto the work engine's cowcatcher. Jim signaled the engineer to roll.

Leaning against the snout of the panting engine, Jim looked down the ribbons of steel stretching away from Carfa toward Shoshone. The wind turned the brim of his sombrero back and stirred the collar of his rough plaid shirt about his sturdy neck. It flattened the shirt against his chest, showing off its breadth and girth; it whipped the levis tight about his thighs and legs, revealing their sturdiness.

Jim's slitted gray eyes roamed over the shuttling country. This would be the best cattleland in the West, once the spur was done and the valley connected to the Laramie Short Line. This was his dream and ambition; this progress. The days of long drives to market were gone. Buyers were no longer interested in cattle gaunted by long runs to railhead. Tracks were creeping everywhere, giant arteries in the body of new business. The Sweetwater must have this spur to survive.

Jim was proud as he watched the ties flash beneath his booted feet. He had promoted this. He had persuaded John Amster, the cattle baron, to put up the cash money necessary, taking range as collateral. Every rancher in the valley had subscribed to the plan. Once the road was finished, it would pay for itself. But Jim had the disturbing thought now that if many more troubles or delays hit construction the ranchers would run out of collateral and John Amster would find the whole valley on his hands.

♦ ♦ ♦

THE work train chugged over Summit Pass, and spread Sweetwater Valley out below. Piute River, encased in a verdant sheath of willows and aspens, cut lazy dollops through the belly-deep blue-stem grass. To the south the Gros Ventre Range was a brown, saw-edged barrier, and to the north the Wind River scarps pushed rocky pinnacles into the cobalt sky. The engine picked up momentum down-grade and, rounding a talus, came abruptly to track's end.

The work crews were in little groups lounging about piles of ties and rails. A barbwire fence stretched across the right of way. Behind it were two wagons holding six men in overalls. Each one cradled a rifle in his arm. Jim saw all this as the train screeched to a stop; he quit the cowcatcher, with Doleful Dobbs siding him.

Jim strode straight up the right of way,

not even pausing when O'Connell, the Irish track foreman, stepped forward and said, "Careful, me bye, them spalpeens have their dander up."

As Jim neared the fence, the men came off the wagons and advanced elbow to elbow. Jim singled out a tall, lean man in their center.

"We're taking down this fence," he said. "You're on Bar A Bar range without rights and this is a deeded strip for the tracks."

"Better not try," the tall nester said tersely. "We're homesteaded here and mean to stay. Take your tracks around or make us a price."

Jim did not debate. He kicked forward with his foot and knocked out the shallowly placed fence post. As the wire sagged, he stepped across.

The tall nester tried to ear the hammer of his rifle, but Jim swept the barrel aside and jolted the man on the chin with his right. He caught the man by the collar as he was sinking down, and jerked him upright again.

"You haven't any right here," he said flatly. "I'm taking you in to the sheriff." He looked around at the other nesters. "You coming peacefully or the hard way?"

"Peaceful," said Dobbs, and eared back the hammers of the guns he had drawn.

Jim shied the nester leader toward the work engine. "Get aboard," he ordered. The man pawed at his chin, saying, "You'll regret this, friend. We might have been able to get together on a deal."

Dobbs herded the grumbling nesters to the cow-catcher. Jim turned to the track foreman. "What are you waiting on?" he demanded of the slack-mouthed Irishman.

"Be gorrah," he said, looking from Jim to the nesters, "I could have done that." Then his voice was booming out at the tie and rail setters, lashing them to work.

Jim joined the group on the engine and gave the signal to return to Carfa. And on the ride back, he moodily contemplated the road bed as it shuttled beneath his feet. There were times when this gigantic undertaking grew too large in his mind and he wondered if he could stand the strain of pushing it through. Once, when down in the coal field country, he had seen a spur such as this abandoned for lack of funds. Weeds had sprouted up between the ties and rails were rusted; there had been places where the bed had given out and the tracks sagged out of line. At the time, he had made a comparison between those tracks and the crude wooden crosses above a pioneer's grave. Both were ignoble monuments to the efforts that had been put behind their lives.

At the Carfa station, Jim and Doleful herded the nesters down street to Sheriff Shep Ventur's office. The movement froze the strollers on the boardwalks. They turned to stare at the group entering the combination jail and office. A man got off the rain barrel in front of the Wyoming Bar and went rapidly down street. He turned in to Greg Naylor's Land Office.

Big Shep Ventur got up from behind his desk as Jim shoved the men into the room. A scowl crossed his leathery features as he asked, "What you got here, Durkin?" The lawman's eyes had suddenly narrowed strangely.

"I don't know yet," Jim answered bleakly, "but I want 'em locked up until I find out. Right now a charge of squatting will do to hold them. They had a fence thrown across the right of way and had stopped work on the spur with a threat of guns. That's Amster range. You lock 'em up and I'll prefer the charges."

"You haven't any grounds," came a sharp voice from the doorway to the rear of the clustered men.

JIM turned to Greg Naylor. The land agent's heavy features were oily with excitement. "Maybe they'll prefer charges against you," he went on. "I located them on that land, all legal."

Jim's lips drew thin. "They were on Amster range," he said evenly.

"That never was Amster's land," countered the land agent. "John used it, yes, but it's government range. It was declared open for homesteading two weeks ago by the newspaper down at the county seat."

Jim shifted around until he faced Greg Naylor squarely. "Just what are you trying to do, Naylor?" he asked flatly. "You're the only one in the valley who's given me trouble with the spur. You tried to get money out of the road funds by asking an exorbitant price for your property the right of way had to cross. You wanted freighting concessions and all those things. You didn't get them because the valley knows you for what you are; a shyster. If you're trying something now to get money out of the people by fraud—"

The land agent drew himself up to injured height. "When land is declared open to homestead I have a legal right to locate people on it."

Jim reached out and got Greg by the collar of his shirt and shut off his talk. Greg's narrowed eyes widened with fright as Jim drew him close. "If you're just trying to run a sandy on the valley because they condemned your property—"

"Sheriff," begged the land agent, "make him turn me loose. I got my rights. Get Amster here and we'll settle this right now."

Sheriff Ventur rolled his tongue across his lips. "Guess there ain't no call for rough stuff, Durkin," he said sorrowfully. "If what he says is true he's within his legal right. I can't do anything about it."

Jim let go of Greg's collar. "Get Amster," he said over his shoulder to Dobbs. "He's down at the Wind River House." Doleful ducked out of the office, mumbling to himself.

Jim hitched his leg over the desk edge and rolled a smoke as the silence ran. He got the cigarette going and let the smoke curl around his eyes to hide what he might show there. If what Greg Naylor said was true, he was in a tough spot. If these nesters were legally located on government land they could force him to do one of three things—take the tracks around, wait two years for condemnation proceedings, or buy them out. Jim cursed himself for not watching Greg more closely. He had been pretty bitter about not getting his price for that strip of right of way.

Jim shied his cigarette into the street as portly John Amster came into the office. His corpulent body was dressed in expensive broadcloth. A flowing black stock curled beneath his second chin. Amster had grown as fat as the cattle on the huge ranch he owned in Sweetwater Valley. He had been lean and hard once, fighting his way to power with the cruelty of a feudal baron. But for many years now he had been content to sit back and let his money do his fighting. And year by year he had become more powerful.

"What's this about nesters on my land?" he demanded gruffly, his eyes sweeping the company.

"It isn't your land," Greg Naylor said smugly. "Did you ever file or buy that strip along Satan's Wash? Did you, Amster?"

Jim held his breath. Amster started to say something, paused and scratched his head. After a moment, he said sheepishly, "Come to think of it, I guess I didn't. Guess I didn't." His eyes didn't leave Greg Naylor.

Jim let out a gusty sigh and felt his palms begin to sweat. There was sweat on his brow, too.

CHAPTER TWO

Renegade Proposition

JIM DURKIN studied John Amster closely. "Why didn't you tell me that wasn't your land?" he asked as patiently as he could.

Amster shrugged. "It's been mine by right of usage for so long I just forgot I hadn't filed on it."

"Just forgot!" Jim echoed hollowly.

The tall nester said, "That'll cost you, friend."

"You tell 'em, Rep," said one of his companions. "They'll have to buy us out now. Their tracks are probably being laid on our land already."

Jim ran his tongue across his lips but couldn't wet them. "I'll give you a fair price," he said.

"You'll give us what we ask," declared Rep, "or pull up your tracks."

"That land's worth five dollars an acre," said Jim.

"Not no more, it ain't," said the nester. "Things have gone up around here. Ain't you heard that there's a railroad buildin'? It'll improve the land value."

His friends laughed at the crude jest.

Jim cracked the knuckles of his fingers. "Come down to the office and we'll talk this over."

He led the way down street to the little station house. Amster and Naylor followed along. At the door, Jim turned to Doleful. "Ride out and see if there are any more fences across the line. If there are, bring the people in."

Doleful went.

With the nesters grouped about his desk, Jim looked up at them and said, "Five dollars an acre."

"Seven," said the nester leader.

"Six," said Jim.

"Seven," repeated the man.

"Six-fifty."

The nester shook his head. "It'll go to eight in a minute—maybe go to nine."

Jim looked at their set faces and saw there was no use in arguing further. They held the whip and knew it. He got out his bank drafts and made out the notes. His hands trembled a little as he passed them out. The nesters scanned the notes carefully, then turned from the office.

When they were gone, Jim looked at Greg Naylor from under slitted lids. "I'll give you twenty-four hours to get out of town," he said flatly.

Greg chuckled uncomfortably and looked at John Amster. "Didn't I tell you, John?" he asked.

Jim's eyes popped open at the familiarity. Amster was shrugging his stocky shoulders. The quick heat that had flared between them at the law office but moments ago was gone.

Jim exploded, "You knew?" His hands dropped to his gun.

"Take it easy," gruffed Amster. "About all you need to do now, after what you've just done, is to kill somebody. That would put you in solid with the valley. I figured that after a while you'd listen to reason."

"Reason?" echoed Jim. He was finding it hard to breathe, and he kept shuttling his eyes from the smirking Greg to the scowling Amster.

"Reason," repeated John. "You now know what the cost of putting in a railroad is. You know the—should I say—the misfortunes that befall construction. Perhaps—"

Jim got out of his chair. "You mean you have been working with Greg all along? The labor trouble, derailing the work train—you two!"

"Don't be a fool," snapped Naylor. "Here's John's chance to get the whole valley. We thought you had something like that in mind when you came to him. We were just waiting to see how much of a share you wanted."

Jim drew his gun and eared the hammer.

Amster spread his pudgy hands. "Put it away," he said harshly. "What reason would you give as to why you killed the man who is financing this railroad? Put that gun away."

Shaking with anger, Jim's thumb eased the hammer down. Heavily he resumed his chair.

"Things can be worked out if you'll string along with us." Amster put his hands on the desk. "A few more accidents, such as we've had, and the ranchers will have signed all their land to me to get the road completed. Greg here is in line as my business agent on the outside to handle the cattle at the packing houses. There's no reason why you wouldn't make me a good foreman. We could be the biggest combination in all Wyoming."

The silence lay heavy for a moment. Then Jim raised his eyes. The gray of them was burnished steel now, and his creased lips were bloodless. "Two hundred ranchers in the valley have their hopes pinned on the spur," he said slowly. "Two hundred people who have given their blood and sweat for that land. If you think I'd sell them out, you've got another guess coming. If you think you're going to control the Sweetwater, figure again.

"I'm head of construction, with the people backing me. I can't expose you. I haven't any evidence. No one would believe my word against yours. You've been pretty clever in seeing to that. But you can't stop me, either. I'm building that road, Amster, doubling the guard against any more tricks. You'll get your money, every dime you've loaned the people, when the spur is done and the first shipment of beeves roll to Laramie. Naylor, you'll get what's coming to you on that day, too, if you're still in the country. Good day, gentlemen."

Greg turned to Amster. Spreading his hands deprecatingly, he said, "I told you so."

"Meet me at the office in half an hour," snapped John.

"Yeah, it wouldn't do for you two to be seen in each other's company," Jim said harshly, "after you've established the fact that you hate each other. I believed that, and the other valley ranchers still do. Your only mistake so far has been in tipping your hand to me."

Greg turned from the office. Amster watched him go, then swung back to Jim after the door had closed behind the land agent.

"I'll give you one more chance," he offered heavily. "I can use a man like you. If it's being associated with Naylor that's bothering you, I'll get him out of the way after this is finished."

Jim's eyes stopped Amster. "No honor among thieves, eh, John?" said Jim. "Well, neither of you will be here when the first carload of cattle roll off the spur onto the Laramie Short Line tracks. Neither money nor men stop progress, John."

Amster reached into his lapel pocket and brought out a crooked cheroot. He jammed it into his mouth. "We'll see who's here when the first cars roll," he said testily.

"I never noticed before," said Jim quietly, "how well your cigars fit your face."

♠ ♠ ♠

WITH a curse, John Amster turned from the office. His anger knew few bounds as he went down the street. He waved and smiled mechanically at some of the valley folks who had come to town for supplies, but his thoughts were dark.

Jim Durkin was a fool, like his father had been before him. There had been a time when old Ken Durkin could have come along with the Amster Bar A Bar. He had refused in much the same man-

ner as his son. Old Ken had instilled a hatred for the Durkin name within Amster; for the Durkins had always had the love and respect of the valley people. John Amster had never gained it. So Ken Durkin had been a fool, as far as John was concerned. He could have been a powerful man. As it was, he had left Jim but a small ranch up against the Gros Ventre Range.

Well, when this spur was done, there wouldn't be any Durkins left in Sweetwater Valley. John Amster would be the only important rancher left. He turned into the Shoshone Casino. With a casual nod to the patrons, he went up the back steps to the balcony and into a room.

With the door closed and latched behind him, he turned to the men seated about the circular table. The nesters who had caused the trouble at track's end were grinning. Greg Naylor's fingers drummed nervously on the table top.

"No one saw you?" Amster asked the group.

They shook their heads. The nester leader, Rep, said, "That was slicker than we expected, John."

Amster stared at him. "John?"

Rep gulped and his face paled. "Mister Amster," he corrected himself.

John sat down. "Where's the money?"

Reluctantly, the men pulled rolls of bills from their pockets and handed them to Amster. "Cashed the check he gave us," said Rep. "You can lend 'em the money again, Mister Amster, at interest."

"I don't like it," grumbled Naylor. "I figured the deal would turn Durkin to our side. He's got too many friends. If he was with us no one would suspect a thing. Now that he knows—shoot him down, I say."

"What does he know that he can tell?" snapped Amster. "The trouble with you, Naylor, is you've played with too many small deals. This is big, and I'll handle it as such. He's got the people on his side. Murdering him would pull the lightning down on us. His friends would never give up until they found the jigger who'd dry-gulched him. We'll get him my way. Let those same friends who stand by him now run him out of the country or hang him. Then our hands are clean. If you're beginning to feel a stripe crawling up your back, Naylor—"

Greg's face blanched a little. "Nothing like that," he said quickly. "You got the right idea, Joh—Mister Amster."

Amster looked ponderously around at his men. All the vanity and arrogance he had acquired through the years was in his florid face.

"When John Amster starts out to get something," he said proudly, "he does it right. That's why I'm the biggest rancher in the valley. That's why I'll be bigger. You men have your orders as to what I expect. The man who slips up will answer to me, personally. Now get out, all of you."

As the men scraped back their chairs and rose, John smacked his pudgy fist into his fat palm and chuckled, "It'll be fun to listen to Durkin talk to the people when the next meeting is called."

There was something in that chuckle that kept the men from grinning with him. They went out singly, the back way.

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down the steps to the alley. There wasn't one of them who looked back.

CHAPTER THREE

Trapped

JIM DURKIN did not move from his chair after John Amster left the office. The corners of his lips were down, and anger held taut every muscle in his body. It was like John had said—there was only his word that Amster and Naylor were working to gain control of the whole valley. Even Doleful Dobbs, Jim's partner, would think him insane if he told the oldster how the wind really blew. Amster was looked upon now as the Sweetwater benefactor.

Jim knew he could get the people of the valley to believe anything of Greg Naylor, but the land agent was only a small tool in Amster's hands. Jim cursed himself bitterly for ever having had this dream of progress. The ranchers had been more or less solvent until he had played into Amster's hands by selling them the idea of a community-financed railroad. Jim was jerked from his bitter reflection by that instinct that tells a man he is being spied upon. A shadow moved away from the dusty side window.

Evening had come on, and he could hear the work train whistling at the peak of Summit Pass as it ferried in the laborers. He listened to the stealthy tread of boots edging their way around toward the front door. Amster wasn't wasting any time. Jim eased his gun in his holster and slid silently out of his chair. He crossed the dark room in a few strides and flattened himself against the wall beside the door.

Slowly, the panel opened and the figure stepped cautiously into the room. Jim drew his gun, kicked the door shut and jabbed the muzzle of the weapon into the small of the intruder's back.

The person straightened and cried out a tight, "Oh!"

Jim froze. It was a woman's voice. He managed to mumble with embarrassment, "I'm—I'm sorry, ma'am." He pouched his gun and stepped around her, to light the lamp.

Her voice followed him through the gloom. "I'd just as soon be killed as scared to death. Is this a habit with you or are you just afraid of the dark?"

The yellow rays of the lamp threw back the gloom. Jim adjusted the glass chimney and turned the wick just so, then he looked up. The words stuck in his throat.

She was lovely, even in levis and plaid shirt, with the dust of the trail still on her oval features. There was a little smudge beside one ear, where she had scratched at a trickle of sweat. Her sombrero was tugged low on her forehead, and her gray eyes were afire beneath the wide brim. Her hair was dark, tied at the nape of her neck with a ribbon, then cascading down between her shoulders. Her shirt was open at the throat, and the pulse there was beating fast.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he repeated soberly. "I saw you move away from the window and heard you coming so quietly around to the front—"

She gave a little laugh. It seemed to Jim the most musical sound he had ever heard. "I shouldn't blame you," she said. "I was told to come here, but finding the place dark and seeing you so still, I thought you were asleep. I came around quietly to make sure before going somewhere else for my information."

Jim shoved his hands into his pockets, for they seemed big and awkward and out of place under her close scrutiny. "I'd be glad to help you, any way I can." His voice sounded funny; there was some strange warmth running around inside him.

"I'm Dale Badell," she said. "I've

come all the way from the coal-field country with ten head of horses. I'm looking for my father. He wrote me that he's bought a little place for us. He said that when the spur is done I'll be able to get somewhere with my horse breeding."

"Grat Badell is my boss powder monkey out at the Rocky Point tunnel," said Jim. "I'm Jim Durkin, head of construction. This valley will be the best breeding range in the West when the track is done."

Dale smiled faint acknowledgement of his name and studied him sharply. "Does my father come into town each night?" she asked.

Jim nodded. "Usually. The work train's pulling in now. Let's go see."

He turned down the wick of the lamp and ushered Dale from the office. When he took her arm to pass her through the door, the touch had an electric effect. In silence they awaited the oncoming engine. Jim stole a glance at her out of the tail of his eye as the headlight swept around the curve and threw her into bold relief. She was more lithesome than he had at first thought. The tip of her Stetson barely reach to his shoulder point.

The train clanked to a stop and the workers boiled from the flatcars. Jim searched the faces for Grat's, but couldn't find it among them.

He stopped one of the men. "Where's Badell?"

"Still out at the hole," said the hard-rock man. "He's plantin' the shots for tomorrow. There's some tricky shale showin' up."

Jim turned to Dale. "We could ride out."

"I wouldn't want to put you to that trouble."

"It's nothing. I feel as though I'd like the ride. My job's kept me away from the saddle too long." He wanted to tell her the real reason: that he didn't want to lose her right away, that she was the first person with whom he had come in contact since the beginning of the spur who could take his mind off his troubles.

"My horses are down at the corral," she said.

"Come on."

♥ ♥ ♥

THEY went down the street side by side. Jim felt deep admiration for her. Herding ten head of horses from the coal-field country was a job for a man.

They turned into the corral. Jim saddled up his paint. Dale disdained waiting for him to help her; she got a saddle on her palomino and swung up. She looked to him for guidance, so Jim dug the spurs to his mount. They roared down the street and out of town.

The stars were tumbling out around the high scarps and the moon shot through the clouds haloing Bald Peak. The air was musty with the smell of curing blue-stem grass and there was the tang of piñon pine in the cool night breeze. Jim's chest swelled and he expelled a long sigh.

When the first quick steam was gone from their mounts, they walked them side by side in silence. Finally, Dale said, "That gun trick you pulled on me? Expecting trouble?"

Jim turned a little in his saddle and looked at her. The gloom hid her expression, but he had a feeling that there was more behind her words than mere curiosity.

"A man never knows," he said. "I guess I was just startled."

"You don't look like the kind who scares easily."

Jim laughed. "I'm skittish as a mule deer in the dark."

"This road you're building?" she prompted. "What is your personal interest?"

Jim shoved his hand back on his head and hooked a knee over the horn of his saddle. The horses were very close together.

"Personal interest?" he echoed. "No more than anyone else has, I guess. I have a small ranch. The spur will make it worth more. My real interest is in the progress the track will bring here. The Sweetwater Valley is the only land I know. My father put his roots down here; and mine are sunk pretty deep, too. We'll all benefit by the road."

Dale let the silence run for a moment, then said, "But all this responsibility and work you've taken on? That should pay you more than just sharing in the benefits of the community."

"That's pretty high pay," said Jim. "Doing things for other people. Seeing a dream come true. I guess I'm a lot like my dad. He wanted to leave some monument behind him. He just wasn't lucky. When this road's done and people are prospering because of it, when the towns expand and more people come to settle, I'll be paid in full. You can sweep my ranch out from under me with a bad winter, rustle my cattle and burn my barns, but this road will go on, the rails kept polished by the progress of the children growing up here. No one can take the track away from me. I swung this deal and I'm building the road."

The silence built up between them again. Jim stared out across country to where the black barrier that was the mountains rose to the star-shot sky. Yes, this was going to be the best cattle country in the whole of Wyoming when the spur was in. And it would be finished and given to the people if he had to run the tracks over the dead bodies of John Amster and Greg Naylor—and his own.

"My father was only partly right about you when he wrote me," said Dale. "He said you were a dreamer and a fool. Is that the tunnel ahead?" She lifted her mount into a trot and swung quickly away.

Jim matched her move, swinging his leg back over and finding the stirrup. He looked at Dale sharply, but was balked by the darkness. He would have liked to have seen her face so he would know whether it was the "fool" or "dreamer" part of her father's account of him that she had accepted.

At the tunnel mouth, they slid from their saddles. Ground-anchoring their mounts, Jim led the way in. He picked up one of the lighted torches by the entrance and held it above his head. The yellow flame threw crazy patterns on the rock walls.

When they had gone more than a hundred yards, Jim thrust the torch behind him. He was hearing a hissing sound other than that of the torch. He reached out and stayed Dale with his hand. He turned and looked behind him. A cry tore from his lips. He dropped the torch and swept Dale into his arms and started to run. The bulging concussion of exploding dynamite hurled him back as if he were a straw in a tornado. He was smashed flat to his back, and Dale was crushed heavily against his chest before rolling from his grasp.

For long moments he lay there, stunned, his ears roaring from concussion. Fine rock dust clouded the air and made breathing difficult. When he could move he rolled over and found Dale's booted foot with one outstretched hand.

"You all right?" he croaked.

"All right," she murmured. "Jim, what—"

"The fuse was in that deep crevice, and I walked right past it," he said bitterly. "Some more of their work."

"Whose?"

Jim didn't answer. He got to his feet and explored the barrier that had been thrown across their exit. There must be tons and tons of rock down. Dale's presence made Jim choke back the curses

welling to his lips. This was another Amster-Naylor trick; and they couldn't have planned it better. They'd not only choked the tunnel and raised construction costs by delay, but had caught the one man who knew them for what they were.

"Grat!" Jim called. "Grat Badell!"

His own voice mocked him. Grat must have completed his chore and left or now lay dead somewhere, victim of an Amster gun.

Jim knew there wasn't a chance, and he wondered how he would tell Dale. She put a hand on his arm. It was trembling a little but there was no waver in her voice as she said, "I guess we better start digging. We've got a lot of mucking to do."

♦ ♦ ♦

JIM wanted to sweep her into his arms in that moment. That strange warmth he had experienced since first lighting the lamp there in the office was a tangible thing now. Here was a girl to tie to.

He squeezed her arm reassuringly, saying, "Stand back while I test the slump."

He turned to the crumpled wall with exploring fingers. His hands ran over the debris. He silently murmured a prayer that the explosion had been a shattering blast, one that did not leave big boulders no man could move. He spun as a match flamed and Dale was about to relight the torch she had found. Jim knocked it from her hand.

"We'll need all the oxygen we have," he said. "The flame would only eat it up."

"I didn't stop to think," she murmured.

Jim turned back to the slump, picked up a boulder and carried it down-tunnel. Then he returned for another. Time after time he stumbled in the stygian darkness. As he labored, guiding Dale with his voice, he hoped she would not think how long it must be before help would come. The men wouldn't return to track's end until after dawn. They had a half mile to walk to the tunnel. He calculated it was a little after midnight now.

Sweat began to pour from his body. He made Dale quit carrying stones when she fell for the fourth time. The air was getting pretty close, sapping their strength. Jim took off his shirt and made a pillow of it for her head.

As he turned away from her to resume his work, she pulled him back. "Jim," she said huskily, "you might be a dreamer, but you're no fool."

Embarrassment left him at a loss for words.

"Jim," she repeated drowsily, and her fingers came up to run over his sweaty cheek.

He bent down then and kissed her. The fine rock dust was on their lips and the lack of oxygen had turned them dry and hard, but he had never felt such a thrill. Even with the darkness, Dale involuntarily closed her eyes.

Jim rose from beside her. "I've got to get on with the work," he said in a whisper.

"No," she murmured sleepily. "It's no use. There's no hope. You don't have to hide that by carrying on. Sit down and take my hand."

Jim did. She was right. His efforts were of no avail. He had known that from the first. He had only worked to keep her from becoming too frightened. She wasn't afraid now. A peaceful sleepiness stole over Jim, and his head drooped toward his chest and his lungs sawed at the thin air. The roaring in his ears increased. He kept tipping to the side. For a moment he fought giving in to the impulse to sleep, but it was no use. He sank into oblivion. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Five Miles Inside Hell

JIM DURKIN awoke to a series of flashing lights streaking across his eyes. Through the roar in his ears, he heard men's voices, felt hands lifting him. There was the intoxicating smell of fresh, dank air. Then darkness washed over him again. He tried desperately to say, "Dale Badell," but failed.

When next he became conscious, he stared up at the ceiling of a room. Slowly, his eyes came into focus and he knew it was the Wyoming House room he shared with Doleful Dobbs. The old man was sitting on the edge of the bed. He grunted something, and Doc Barbee leaned over him.

"He'll be sound as a dollar in four hours," he said.

Doleful looked at Jim and chuckled. "Tight squeak, partner," he said.

"The girl?" Jim managed.

"Grat took her to his place," said Doleful. "She was in better shape than you. She kept fightin' like a wild cat to come along with you. I figured she was out of her head." He looked hard at Jim.

Doc Barbee broke in, "I've got to get out and see her. Jim, you take it easy for a while."

Jim nodded. "Give her my—" he paused—"my regards, Doc."

Doleful's eyes narrowed. A grin broke the doctor's lips. "Sure, Jim, sure," he said. "Your regards." Then he left.

"How did we make it?" Jim asked of Doleful.

"Grat said he'd gone into Shoshone for some fuses," answered the oldster. "He came back and saw your horses. He knew the palomino was his daughter's. He like to have killed both the horses coming to town. We roused everybody and took the train back. You should have seen Grat dig. Cussin' and cryin' and doin' the work of five men. Grat can't figure yet how his set charge blew without fuses."

Jim stared again at the ceiling. Of course Grat couldn't figure it out. An Amster man had affixed the fuses. But there was no way to prove that. Mentally, Jim computed the delay and cost of this latest Amster trick. He had thought he would be able to squeeze by without asking the valley people to sign away more land to Amster, in exchange for ready cash, at the next meeting. He couldn't now. He'd have to play further into John's hands. Jim knew Amster wanted the road completed. John Amster wouldn't stand in the way of that. It would be his final trick to ruin the valley that Jim had to copper. Jim closed his eyes and slept.

Doleful awakened him by jerking at his arm. "There's a jigger here that wants to see you bad," he said. "I've tried to tell him you weren't interested in any proposition, but he won't leave until he sees you. He's from Texas."

Jim got to his elbows and found his strength was returning. "Bring him in."

Doleful ushered the man into the room. He was tall and hungry looking, twisting his sweat-stained sombrero nervously in his hands. His levis and plaid shirt were faded from trail wear.

"You've got something on your mind, friend?" asked Jim.

"I'm up from the salt grass country," said the man. "Jess Toliver, they call me. I got two hundred head of gaunted steers. Figured on stakin' out up here somewheres. My old lady and kids are bellerin' to git back to Texas. They don't like no part of this country." He stopped, twisting his hat again.

"And?" prompted Jim.

"I want to sell my stock," the man said bluntly, "for enough to get me back home. I inquired around town and you

seem to be the only hombre that'd be interested. Everybody else has all their money sunk in the track goin' in."

"Mine's sunk, too," said Jim. "I haven't a single head of stock under my own iron. There's always a few buyers around town. Why don't you try 'em?"

"I did," said the Texan. "Tried 'em all. They 'lowed as how they was prime beef if they wasn't so gaunted. Said they'd buy 'em in a minute if it wasn't for that. They say why buy gaunted stock when they can get all the fatted ones there is. I'll sell cheap, friend."

Jim closed his eyes. He saw something that might work. Maybe he wouldn't have to ask the Sweetwater people for more money. His eyes popped open when he heard Doleful saying, "Like I said, friend, my pard don't—"

"Hold it," ordered Jim, as the man turned to leave. "How much a head?"

"Two dollars," said the Texan. "They'll bring six."

"Two hundred head, two dollars a head," Jim murmured. "Doleful, go down to the office and get four hundred dollars out of the safe and give it to this man. Get a bill of sale and take the beef out to our place."

"You can't—" began Doleful.

"Look," countered Jim. "If we can fatten them up and get six, that'll bring twelve hundred dollars. We won't have to ask Amster for more money."

Doleful worried his nose with a calloused finger. "Yeah," he said. "It's for the good of the road."

"For the good of the road," said Jim aloud. Under his breath, he added, "And for the beating of John Amster."

The Texan said, "Me and the missus are sure beholdin' to you."

"Good luck on the back trail," said Jim as the men left the room.

When he was alone, he smiled wanly. Wait until John Amster heard of this. He'd stew in his own fat. Jim slept again.

FOR the next two weeks, Jim almost forgot how to sleep. The rails were pushed through the completed tunnel and on toward Shoshone. The end of the line was in sight. When he wasn't riding the work train, he was in the saddle. He drove the men, but no one worked harder than he. Nor did he take time to try and stop the rumbling of the valley people over the nester deal. He would whip them back into line at the coming meeting; whip them into line by showing them the road would be completed with the profits from the cattle deal he had made. Jim had John Amster beaten. But he'd have to keep his secret until the right moment.

When he could snatch a moment from his thousands of chores and details, he rode to his ranch and looked over the cattle Doleful guarded. Their hides were sleeking up and ribs disappearing.

Several times Jim turned in the direction of the Badell spread. He hungered for a look at Dale, but each time he curbed his desire. When the road was done there would be time for courting. But he saw her before him always.

The track was within five miles of Shoshone when the day of the meeting arrived.

Carfa was filled with teams and broncs. The valley folk had been streaming in since early morning. Several of the leaders had stopped by the office, but seeing that Jim was busy with the books did not bother him.

Jim just pretended to be busy. He did not want to talk to any of them until he spoke to all. He had sent a cattle buyer out to his ranch to deal with Doleful Dobbs. Sometime during the meeting Doleful would show up with the profits. Jim wanted to drop his bombshell in the meeting and watch John Amster's face, and the faces of the people.

When the blacksmith sent clangorous waves from his triangle down the street,

Jim tucked his books under his arm and went to the town hall.

As he was about to enter, Dale Badell stepped out and confronted him.

Jim took her hands in his. "I've been so busy—" he began.

"I know," she said dully. "I've tried to catch up with you. I've a confession—"

Jim gripped her hands hard. It disturbed him deeply to see her this way; made him wonder. "Wait until after the meeting," he said gently. "I've one to make, too."

Her eyes lighted for a second. She stammered, "But—"

"Not now," he interrupted.

"You'll never understand."

A man stuck his head out of the door, saying, "We're all here, Durkin."

Jim gave her hands a final squeeze. "I'll understand," he said. "Wait right here." He turned into the hall.

As he went down the crowded aisle to the raised dais at the end of the big room, there were some who clapped him on the back and some who stared at him with distrust. Amster was on the stage, his corpulent body spilling over the chair in which he sat. Sheriff Shep Ventur was there and the three valley leaders, Mark Raport, Nick Duval and Red Matson.

Mark Raport rose and stilled the buzz of conversation by rapping his knuckles on the desk. "We're all here," he said simply. "We'll listen to Jim Durkin's report."

Jim turned and faced the sea of faces. Greg Naylor was in the back of the hall, his thin lips slightly parted. Jim smiled inwardly.

He cleared his throat and said, "Most of you, no doubt, have been worrying about the nester deal. That cost us some money, like other things over which I had no control." He paused, looking around at Amster. "As you know, the road is near completion. Three more days will see the last spike driven. Go home and round up your beef and get ready for the first shipment. Drive them to the Shoshone loading pens. Before the sun sets on Friday they'll be rolling to Laramie."

Excitement stirred the people, but it was stilled quickly by a rancher's blunt, "How about more money?"

"We don't need it," said Jim. He stared triumphantly at Greg Naylor.

The ranchers started their buzzing again. Jim's smile froze. Greg seemed pleased instead of surprised. Jim swung to Amster. The big cattleman was out of his chair, examining the books.

Placing a pudgy finger on the figures, John said loudly, "The books show you have a balance of three hundred dollars. You'll have a fifteen hundred dollar payroll to meet upon completion. And what's this four hundred dollar item here that's unlisted?"

"That's for cattle," Jim said bluntly.

"Cattle?" echoed Amster. "You aren't permitted to use the people's funds for the purpose of restocking your range."

"I didn't," snapped Jim. "I used the four hundred to buy cattle that I could resell and make my payroll without asking the people for more money. I sent a buyer out there this morning. I'm turning a good deal for the benefit of the road. My partner, Doleful Dobbs, will be here any minute with the proof. I haven't said anything about this to anyone, for fear I might meet opposition. I—"

He paused. The town hall door had opened and the cattle buyer was coming down the aisle. Dobbs was not with him. The man came forward.

"What kind of a chase was that you sent me on?" he snapped at Jim.

Jim's eyes narrowed. "Chase?"

"I couldn't find Dobbs or any cattle."

"What!" thundered Amster.

"Durkin, here," said the cattle buyer,

"told me to go out to his spread and bid on two hundred head of fatted beeves. There isn't any cattle out there."

CHAPTER FIVE

Gunsmoke Progress

THE wall clock's ticking was loud in the stunned silence. Jim stared at the buyer, unable to believe him.

"Not even a sign?" he said.

"There may have been cattle there once," said the buyer. "But not now."

"I think I understand," thundered Amster. "Durkin pulled that nester deal himself and made money on it. Now he's worked this cattle deal with your funds. I was suspicious of him when he first came to me with the proposition for this spur. He saw a way to make some quick money and skip the country. He—"

"That's a lie!" barked Jim. "You were the one who caused all—"

He stopped abruptly. Everyone was staring at him strangely. Jim bit at his lip, suddenly realizing how empty his outburst must seem. John Amster held the cards.

Greg Naylor shouted from the rear of the hall, "Just like a crook, trying to put the blame on someone else! Grab him!"

Jim saw things clearly now. Amster and Naylor had rigged this deal, too. And this one would stick, unless Doleful and the cattle were found. In the hands of these people, Jim would never get a chance to look for either. He drew his gun and slashed at Amster.

Then he was backing toward the rear door. Sheriff Shep Ventur said, "Put down that gun, Durkin!"

Jim's answer was a tightening of his lips. There was no use telling them he would be back; that he'd search the rest of his days for the proof of what he had tried to do. He might have been able to get Raport, Duval and Matson to listen, for they were standing there with stunned surprise on their faces. There wasn't time now. The people occupying the benches were grumbling sullenly. Jim knew he was convicting himself in their eyes, by this escape, but Amster and Naylor weren't finished with the railroad. Someone who knew them for what they were had to be free—free to seek out their last move and beat them.

Carefully, Jim opened the door, darted out and slammed it shut behind him. A shout welled behind, and as he ducked away from the panel lead ripped through it.

He ran down the alley and turned in between the mercantile and clothing stores. A pony dozed at the rack out front. As he lifted into its saddle, the shouts and shots of the men boiling from the town hall sent him away at a killing gallop. He saw Dale Badell standing on the boardwalk, looking after him, arms akimbo.

Jim hit into the Gros Ventre foothills. Posses deployed and tried to pinch him in. They almost succeeded amid the lower reaches, but he escaped with a bullet hole through his shirt and an ugly crease across his right thigh. He lost pursuit amid the higher and more tortuous trails of the mountains. Both he and his mount were jaded and blowing when he reined down in the center of a piñon clearing.

Slipping his saddle from the mount, Jim stretched out, using it as a head rest. He stared up at the sky as many thoughts beat through his head.

Where was Doleful? He knew Amster and Naylor had run off the cattle. Was his partner lying dead in some out-of-the-way canyon, his body food for wolves and buzzards? That thought bathed Jim in cold sweat and prompted an insane desire to return to town and wring the truth from Amster. But he couldn't do

that. Everyone in the valley would shoot him on sight now.

Jim had no doubt but that the road would be finished. Amster would pay the bills, taking more land as collateral, computed at a dollar an acre. Then where would his next move be made? Amster couldn't let the Sweetwater people ship their cattle out. Not even the first time, for arrangements had already been made to market them. That would allow the valley people to pay according to the interest rates on the notes John held.

As the stars tumbled out, Jim got a firm grip on himself. That first train would go through. It had to, if the Sweetwater ranchers were to save their land.

Jim rose and resaddled his mount. Carefully avoiding the trails, he took a round-about way to his ranch. There he went over the ground carefully, but there were no signs pointing to violence that would give him a clue to the whereabouts of his partner. The herd had been rustled, obviously, and the trail pointed across the valley toward the Wind River Range.

Trailing them would have to wait. The most important thing was to keep out of sight until the day the first train was to roll to Laramie. Jim figured he could do the people more good by lying low. Once the shipment of cattle was safe, then he would take up the trail of the rustlers—and follow it to hell if he must . . . He turned back into the mountains.

♠ ♠ ♠

THIS morning the throaty whistle of an engine drew Jim to the rocky promontory that overlooked the Sweetwater. His chest swelled as he looked down upon the sinuous line of cars rolling toward Shoshone. The first Laramie Short Line train. The track was done and the Sweetwater was ready to ship. This was the day. The big day.

As he was about to turn to his horse, he spun back with narrowed eyes. Two horsemen had just quit a clump of trees directly below him. One was pointing up at him now, and the other was spurring his mount up the slope.

Jim quit the promontory. He wouldn't have time to saddle his horse and run for it. A cold rage gripped him. He had no doubt that Amster had thrown men into the hills to keep Jim from returning to town this day.

He heard, rather than saw, the horsemen deploy as they came up the slope. One of them was going to pass close. Jim kept himself screened until the rider was almost upon him, then he stepped into the open with eared hammer, saying sharply, "Reach!"

The unexpectedness and surprise almost unseated the rider. But when Dale Badell was again securely seated in the leather, she said hotly, "Jim Durkin, you'll kill me with fright yet."

Jim eased his hammer down and repouched his gun. "Seems like we met this way before," he said sheepishly.

"Jim—" Dale swung from her mount —"I brought dad."

Grat Badell had swung toward the sound of their voices and entered the clearing. He was slumped disconsolately in his saddle.

"What is it?" asked Jim sharply.

"Dad, tell him!"

Grat raised his haggard face. "I've been blind, Durkin," he said harshly. "I didn't realize anything was wrong with Amster. It took me a long time to see he could have fired that charge in the tunnel that trapped you and Dale. I didn't even see it when he sold me my section of land cheap. I thought he was a nice fella with the interests of the valley at heart. He had to come and get me and force me to mine the tunnel again at gun point before I knew—"

"Dad's been a tool without knowing it," began Dale.

"I had to do it or get killed," Grat continued tonelessly. "It's fixed so that when Amster presses the telegraph key to send the message that the train is ready to pull out from Shoshone, she'll blow. The train will leave then and be rolling fast when it hits the tunnel. She'll telescope just like that!" He snapped his fingers. "Amster will have an alibi, because he's in Shoshone with the people. I've sure been a fool!"

"The cattle will be killed," Jim carried on in that same toneless voice. "It won't take much to repair the tunnel and track, but the prime stock of Sweetwater Valley will be gone. John will take over everything."

As his voice tailed off, he turned to his saddle. Quickly, he screwed the leather into place. Dale put a hand on his arm and kept him from swinging up.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"Get to the tunnel and rip out the wires."

"You won't have time. It's too far, and Amster has men there to guard it until it blows. Then they're to straighten things out and make it look like a cave-in. The people are all in Shoshone loading the cars by now. If I'd only been able to find you two days ago, or had the chance to explain our suspicions to you in front of the town hall—"

"You knew then?"

"We had an idea. I had hoped you would understand dad's position."

Jim silenced her by pulling her close. He tilted her quivering chin with his finger and kissed her on the lips. Then he put her from him.

"I'm heading for town," he said evenly. "That telegraph key won't—"

Dale clutched at him. "You'll be killed!"

"No matter," Jim said bleakly. "That train's going through."

He spun from Dale's grasp and swung into the saddle. The girl leaped astride her mount. "Come on, Dad," she cried. "We're with him."

"Till the fuse burns out," swore Grat.

The three roared down the slopes and out across the flat.

♥ ♥ ♥

SHOSHONE was gay with gaudy banners. Dust boiled from the loading pens as the last of the cattle were hazed into the cars. The people were surging toward the telegraph office, to see John Amster send the first message over the wires that would tell Laramie that the Sweetwater Valley spur was officially opened.

No one noticed the three horsemen rein down behind the Casino.

Jim turned to Dale and Grat. "Stay here," he ordered. "One can get closer than three. I'll call when I want you."

Dashing across the street, he made the off side of a loaded car. He went up hand over hand on the ladder to the top, and kept to his stomach once he gained it. Worming his way along, he peered over the other side. Mark Raport, Nick Duval, Red Matson and Sheriff Shep Ventur were on the platform with John Amster. John's hand was poised over the be-ribboned telegraph key which had been moved outside for the occasion.

"And now," he was saying, "I dedicate the Sweetwater Valley spur—"

Jim whipped out his gun and pulled the trigger. Amster's hand flew away from the instrument. He grabbed the injured member, howling out his pain.

The gathering growled and turned. "Hold it," shouted Jim. "There's four more slugs where that one came from. Keep your hands away from that telegraph key and stand where you are."

Mark Raport stepped to the edge of the platform. "You crazy, Durkin?"

"I want this train to pull out without that key being touched," Jim said sternly. "Right now I can't figure how I would do it myself, so one of you give the engineer the signal to start."

"Someone chance the fool," cried Amster. "Five hundred dollars to the man who downs him."

Jim wet his lips with his tongue. There were plenty of people in the crowd who'd take that offer.

Then a feminine voice was sheering the silence: "The one who tries will never collect."

"And I got something to say about it, too," came a man's voice.

Jim breathed again. The sullen mob was swinging to where Dale and Grat Badell held the top of a car with their rifles.

Grat was going on: "The tunnel's wired to blow up when that key is pressed. I know because I did it, with John Amster holding a gun at my back."

A pistol spoke from the gathering. Grat Badell threw up his hands and rolled from the top of his car like a limp bag of meal. Greg Naylor ducked and started elbowing his way through the crowd.

Jim climbed down from his car and leaped to the platform. Townsmen had a firm hold of Naylor now. Dale and some of the people had gone to Grat's side.

Jim spread his hands. "Amster has been doing all the dirty work, with Naylor helping him," he shouted to them. "You would have laughed if I had tried to tell you that. John was pretty thorough with his tricks, but Grat Badell wouldn't stay bullied. He—"

A lean horseman came boiling into the crowd, halting Jim's speech. He rode his mount right up to the platform. "Which one of you is Durkin?" he asked.

"Me," said Jim.

"Fella name of Dobbs says to corral Amster and Naylor and to hold the train. He's got two hundred head of cattle he says should be on the cars. He'll be in in about two hours. Says tuh hold this Amster an' Naylor because he's got a few jiggers they'll be interested to see. Some nesters that Amster paid to do a rustlin' job. They broke down an' told all about their boss, after Dobbs tracked 'em down an' jumped 'em."

Jim turned to the valley leaders. "There you are," he said, with a touch of excitement in his voice. "He's talking about the cattle I bought for you people. The nesters are Amster men. They'll all talk."

"I got come-alongs on John," said Sheriff Ventur.

"Send a handcar down the line and corral those Amster men at the tunnel," ordered Jim. "Don't anyone touch that key. Tear out the dynamite after you get those men guarding the place. Then one of you go on through to the next station and wire Laramie that the train will be three hours late."

While the men turned to obey, Jim stepped aside as Grat Badell was brought to the platform. John Amster cursed him soundly and was slapped across the mouth by Sheriff Ventur. The sheriff then led John away.

"He's all right," Dale murmured as Jim bent down. "The wound's high in the shoulder. He did the best he could, Jim."

The youngster nodded, taking her hand in his. He drew his gun with his other hand and shoved the muzzle into Dale's side. "Could you do as well as my wife?" he asked, grinning.

"If you'll promise never to throw a gun on me again," she smiled.

Jim shied the weapon away. "Never," he murmured. Then he turned to Mark Raport. "We'll be riding the caboose on the first train," he said. "Dale and I have a big date with a deacon in Laramie."

THE END

ROUGH, TOUGH —AND LONELY

By JACK BLOODHART

JUST after dawn, the wagon train that had camped for three days at Green Springs pulled out, westward-bound for the Promised Land. A few townspeople were on hand to wish it God-speed, waving sleepily and yawning prodigiously in the chilly dawn.

But for the most part Green Springs slept on, content to let the wagon train go on its way unnoticed. Among these was Buffalo Carrigan, who only muttered and turned his huge bulk over on the creaking cot as the wagon train rumbled past his door, its great wheels screaming.

No friend of Buffalo Carrigan's rode that train into the vast unknown. Indeed, after nearly half a lifetime in Green Springs, Buffalo Carrigan knew no man he could call a friend. To think that he could gain one in three short days was laughable . . . though not to Buffalo Carrigan.

But the creaking, rumbling train took many minutes to pass Buffalo's door; his was the last cabin in Green Springs as one rode westward. When the final wagon had passed Buffalo was thoroughly awake. He

Step by step, he picked his way out of the heat, away from the flaming house.

All his lonely life, hatred had dogged the steps of big, tough Buffalo Carrigan, till a tiny foundling girl looked up at him and smiled -- and gave him something worth fighting and dying for!

rolled over, yawned, and sat up, revealing with startling suddenness the huge body that had caused more than one stranger to stare pop-eyed with astonishment.

He was big, but that can be said of many men. His nickname, Buffalo—if he had another, no one knew it—typified him more exactly, with his huge, shaggy-maned head, his enormous legs and thick, long arms, culminating in hands of incredible size and unbelievable strength. At first glance, one might not think of Buffalo Carrigan as a giant, because his six and a half foot height made him well proportioned. But as you studied him, you realized that here indeed was a giant of a man; and if you were wise, as it seemed apparent no one in Green Springs was, you might come to know why Buffalo Carrigan was a lonely, friendless man.

Yawning, Buffalo pulled on his boots—the wisacres said one entire steer-hide went into their making—and his voluminous pants and shirt. Dressed, he crossed the room to his stove, got the fire going and put his coffee on to boil. He handled his utensils gently, as if, knowing his strength, he had schooled himself in gentleness lest he smash everything he touched. Buffalo Carrigan was no clumsy fool, and there was a certain fierce beauty in the way he handled his enormous bulk.

The fire and coffee going, he went to the front door, to gulp in the morning air and greet the sun, a ritual of years' standing. This morning, as always, he looked briefly toward the town, a kind of flushed expectancy on his broad, big-featured face. Though it was ridiculous, and he knew it, Buffalo Carrigan looked toward the town each morning because it might be that someone was coming to pay him an early-morning call.

That was a kind of game Buffalo played with himself. Yet, try as he might, he could not stop the slight film of disappointment that clouded his blue eyes when it became evident each morning that no one was coming, that no one would ever come to visit him.

That was something Buffalo Carrigan could not understand, and would not have understood even if someone told him: that because they feared him, they hated him. He could not fathom that, because all he wanted was simple friendship. He would have been puzzled had anyone told him that the broken heads and swollen faces of a dozen townsmen who had insulted and made fun of him were a bar to that friendship.

He had not wanted to break those heads. They had forced him, by their insults, to do it. And so they feared him, and gave him plenty of room on the walk, and edged away from him at the bar. . . .

The dust of the vanished wagon train was just now settling back to the street. Looking westward, Buffalo felt a queer, nostalgic loneliness for something he'd never known. He wondered how it would feel to be part of a company like that, sharing hardship and joy, despair and heartbreak, and then to drink the wine of rich reward, or even to taste the bitter dregs of defeat, always sharing with others of his kind. . . . Well, he didn't want to leave Green Springs. Why, he wasn't quite sure. Perhaps because he knew that other places would be much the same, or maybe it was that his pride and self-respect rebelled at the thought of letting the town drive him out.

He turned back toward the house, then stopped, his ear cocked. From out back, a strange, mewling, alien sound had reached his ears. He frowned puzzedly, unable to determine what sort of creature made the sound. He walked around the house to investigate the matter, and when his eyes fell upon the source of the sound, his jaw dropped and he could only stare in stupefaction.

"Cripes!" Buffalo Carrigan breathed. "Holy cat! A baby!"

THAT indeed was what it was—a baby, possessed of exceedingly wide blue eyes, the veriest suggestion of hair upon its tiny head, a nose no bigger than Buffalo's little fingernail. It lay in a crude basket, dressed in spotlessly white garments that defied Buffalo's powers of description.

The baby, upon seeing this monster towering above him—Buffalo had seen no more than two or three babies in his lifetime, and they were all "him" as far as he was concerned—waved its legs and arms and grinned.

Startled, Buffalo grinned back. Thus they remained, this tiny mite and the towering giant, grinning at each other for a full minute, while the sun came up and flooded the earth with light, and birds sang and the morning breeze, carrying the scent of sage, stirred the wispy hairs on the baby's head.

Sudden tears came to the eyes of Buffalo Carrigan. "Damn!" he said, kneeling down beside the basket. "I never seen nothin' so small in my life." He licked his lips, cocked his head a little and scowled in worriment. "Dunno exactly what to do with you, feller," he said. He flexed his big hands, wondering. "Where'd you come from?" Then he remembered the wagon train, and nodded slowly. Someone on that train . . .

"Not that it matters where you come from," he said conversationally. "Where a feller's goin' is all that means a damn." The baby agreed with this observation in some strange elfin language which Buffalo, oddly enough, understood.

"Why, you an' me're goin' to get along great—" He broke off in mid-sentence. "You an' me—" he repeated. "Hell, I don't know nothin' about takin' care of you, kid. 'Course, I got enough money to take care of both of us, but that ain't what I mean. It's just—well, hell, you don't want nobody like me lookin' after you."

The baby, with a great show of arms and legs, accompanied by another observation in its own language, objected to that statement.

Buffalo nodded gravely. "Mebbe you do, at that," he said slowly. "Mebbe you do. Well let's be gettin' in."

He lifted the baby, basket and all. Clutching his burden in a vise-like grip, he slowly retraced his steps around the house, to enter by the front door. He picked his way with almost ludicrous care. On his big face was a look of surprised and wondering happiness.

One of the town urchins was just passing Buffalo's door as he rounded the corner of the house. The boy stopped, gawking. He could not see into the interior of the basket, but its general contour, and then a suddenly up-flung leg, revealed its contents.

Buffalo, too, stopped, his eyes narrowing with a hostile light that flamed whenever a townsman evinced too much interest in what he was doing. The boy, itching with curiosity, overcame his fear of the giant to the extent of taking a tentative step forward.

"Whatcha got there?" he asked. "A kid?"

Buffalo nodded, scowling.

"Gee! Where'd you get him? Didja steal him?"

Fury twisted Buffalo's face. "Git!" he snarled, and took a step toward the boy.

The urchin yipped, and streaked off, yelling at the top of his lungs. Buffalo swore softly as he went on inside the house, shutting the door behind him.

He set the basket down gently on a table, then just stood looking down at the baby, frowning.

"Lemme see," he muttered. "You little critters eat, I reckon, an'— Oh, yeah. I see!" A broad grin suffused his face. "You need tendin' to."

He searched around until he uncovered a square of clean cloth of about the right size. Then, his big hands all thumbs, he

set clumsily to work on the infant.

"You savvy, button, I ain't never done no work like this before. Minin' was my busi—" He broke off, big face flushing. "Cripes! He's a she!"

The baby laughed with him, and they alternately grinned and chuckled at each other for half a minute.

At this moment Buffalo's coffee boiled over with a hiss and he jumped up to tend it. That reminded him that the baby must eat. He scatched his huge head.

"Now what in hell does a little gal like you do for grub? I don't reckon you better have bacon an' biscuits an' coffee for a while yet. . . . Milk. Yeah, that's it, milk. I got some canned milk."

The baby agreed with this proposition, without offering any suggestions as to how she was going to drink it. Buffalo, stumped, looked around the room questioningly, and then, on a hunch, probed beneath the faded blankets upon which the baby lay.

"Well, your mammy had sense enough to include some eatin' utensils," he said.

After a while, he had both their breakfasts ready. He gave the baby her bottle and watched while she got under way, then sat down to his own meal. He moved his chair around so he could watch her.

"You oughta have a name," he told her. "'Course, I suppose you got one, but I don't know it. How'd it be if I just called you Honey? Think you'd like that?"

Honey made no answer. Her bottle was empty, and she slept, a trace of a smile on her tiny mouth.

♠ ♠ ♠

SO ENGROSSED was Buffalo in his tiny visitor that he failed to hear the scrape of booted feet outside his door. He looked up, startled at the sound of a peremptory knock.

Buffalo opened the door to face a scowling, hawk-beaked townsman, a fellow Buffalo had often seen but whose name he did not know. Behind him stood the urchin who had passed Buffalo's house earlier.

"The kid here says you threatened to kill him a while back," the townsman, whose name was Nate Rogers, said without ceremony, "an' that you got a baby here yuh stole. What the hell's goin' on, Carrigan?"

Buffalo's jaw tightened, and he felt a hard knot of anger forming in his chest. It was in his mind to slam the door in this meddling fool's face, but he stayed his temper.

"The kid is a liar," he said slowly, looking into the other's eyes. "As fer the baby, I found her this mornin', layin' in a basket at my back door. Somebody left her there."

Nate Rogers opened his eyes in disbelief. "A likely story," he said, and then, because he could think of nothing else, he repeated it. "A likely story."

Buffalo said nothing. His huge bulk effectively blocked the doorway, shutting off Rogers' view of the room within. For a moment it looked as if Rogers would demand admittance, then he backed away.

"We'll see about this," he said. "We'll see, by God!" He and the boy turned and went quickly away, headed back toward the center of Green Springs. Buffalo, frowning, watched them go.

Back inside the house, he shut the door against the town, and looked down at the sleeping child. The morning was warm, and a thin film of perspiration stood on her lip. For a long minute Buffalo stood staring at her, his heart full of an emotion that was new and strange to him.

"Honey," he said, as softly as a big man could. "Honey, little gal, they're goin' to try an' take you away from me. . . ."

This time, because there were more of them, he heard them approaching the house. Buffalo looked up sharply toward the closed door.

Slowly he got to his feet. "They're

comin', Honey," he said, very evenly.

He stood facing the door, fists clenched at his sides, until the first knock sounded. Two steps took him to the door.

At least a dozen people stood outside. In their lead was Nate Rogers and Marshal Charley Boggs.

"You got a baby in there, Buffalo?" Charley Boggs demanded.

Buffalo nodded. "Yeah. She was left at my back door in a basket last night."

A shrill female voice broke in on the conversation: "Stole it, more than likely! Marshal, do your duty! That child must be taken from this terrible man!" A flurry ruffled the crowd as the owner of the voice elbowed her way through, flanked by three others of her sex.

"Now, Sarah," Marshal Boggs said, "I'll get to the bottom of this."

"There's nothing to get to the bottom of!" Sarah Allen shook her bony finger under the marshal's nose.

"Blast it, Sarah, he ain't said he won't give the kid up."

"I won't."

They stared at him, shrinking from the terrible look of fury on his face. Sarah Allen, her female colleagues following, backed away a little. They were much of a pattern—thin, rather bony, severely dressed and with harsh, probing eyes.

"Get out of here!" Buffalo Carrigan snarled at them. "Get out, all of you!"

"Marshal!" Sarah Allen shrilled. "Do your duty! What's the matter? Are you afraid of him?"

Obviously, the marshal was afraid of him. But now the rest of the crowd, which had grown since first arriving at Buffalo's house, took up the shout.

"Take the kid away from him!" "Probably kidnapped it!" "He's a disgrace to the town!" "Remember the next election, Charley!"

Charley Boggs shrugged helplessly. "Better gimme the kid, Buffalo. I don't want no trouble with you, but—"

Buffalo stood motionless, blocking the doorway, not saying anything. Nate Rogers, remembering the morning's rebuff, pushed past the marshal, the crowd at his back needling his courage.

"Get the hell out of the way, Carrigan," he snapped. "We want that kid."

Buffalo's fist moved six inches and caught Nate flush on the chin. He staggered backward, his arms flailing, and only the press of people saved him from sprawling in the dust.

"Shoot him!" someone yelled, half-hysterically. "He's resistin' the law!"

"Marshal!" Sarah Allen screeched. "Arrest that man!"

Charley Boggs yanked a sixgun from his holster, pointed it at Buffalo's belly. "All right, Buffalo," he said, "we want that kid. An' I ain't afraid to use this equalizer."

Buffalo stared at Boggs and at the gun. Veins in his temples pounded furiously, and his chest was tight with anger. His fists clenched and unclenched spasmodically. For an instant it looked as if he would defy the gun. But then, looking up, he saw other men had drawn their guns. He was ringed by them. . . .

Two minutes later Buffalo Carrigan stood in his doorway, watching them go. His face was a blank mask hiding a terrible fury.

With Sarah Allen in the lead, carrying Honey, the crowd marched triumphantly away. Those at the rear turned to jeer at the big man in the doorway.

And then they were gone, and Honey was gone with them. Dazedly, Buffalo turned back inside the house and shut the door. The blanket, kicked into a roll, still lay on the floor; the pans he had got out for her to play with were full of dents, one kicked shapeless by some of the more exuberent reformers. But before they could do more damage, Charley Boggs had driven them from the house, leaving only Sarah Allen and the other women inside.

Without looking at Buffalo, they had picked up the baby, who cried in fright when the crowd charged in, and bore her off. Charley Boggs was the last to go. He had looked at Buffalo, who stood motionless, his arms at his sides, during the desecration of his house.

"Dammit, Buffalo, I don't like this . . . It don't seem right."

Buffalo Carrigan said nothing, only stared at Charley with eyes that seemed to burn a hole in the marshal. The lawman shuddered and hurried away.

♦ ♦ ♦

SHADOWS lay everywhere around the Allen house, and Buffalo had no difficulty in keeping his vigil unseen. For the past week now, the nights had been black and moonless, and for that he was thankful.

This night, he had a premonition that someone watched him, but it annoyed more than frightened him. He was frightened of nothing . . . nothing except the possibility that something might happen to him which would prevent his keeping watch over the house of Sarah Allen, the house to which Honey had been taken.

That fear was the only thing which held him in check on those times when the baby cried, and he could hear her. Then the blood pounded in his head and his face twisted in fury, and his big hands balled into fists. Standing outside, staring out of the darkness with eyes burning in anger, it was all he could do to keep from smashing his way into the house and snatching Honey away from Sarah Allen, and defying the fool townsmen to take her from him again.

But he held himself in check. To do what every fibre of his being cried out to him to do would almost certainly lead him into serious trouble—trouble which might lose Honey to him forever. He refused to admit that she was lost to him now. On the very night that they had taken her, he had begun his nocturnal watch over the house, a watch lasting from the first moment of darkness until the lights were all gone in the house, and everyone inside slept. Then, and only then, did Buffalo Carrigan go home. He had seen Honey through another day.

Tonight, the baby was crying again. Standing outside, deep-hidden in the shadows of a great tree near the house, Buffalo heard her. He stood, motionless as the tree, staring at the house. His fists were clenched and on his face was a look of desperate fury, plainly revealing the turmoil boiling inside him.

"Buffalo!" a voice behind him said.

He relaxed slowly, turning, and looked into the face of Marshal Charley Boggs, dim in the star-glow. Charley stared at him with a mixture of wonder and awe and fear. But he was the law, and his voice was harsh when he spoke.

"What the hell are you doin'?"

Buffalo did not answer for a moment. His face was grim, and anger over the baby's crying still possessed him. Finally he said, "It's no business of yours."

Boggs bridled. "The hell it ain't! I'm hired to enforce the law in this here town. It's my business when I find you sneakin' around like a thief in the night, watchin' good citizens' homes."

Buffalo's lips barely moved. "Good citizens! When they make her cry all the time? What they're doin' to her—"

Charley's eyes widened. "So that's it! I might've knowed! The kid!"

Buffalo said nothing. He realized that he had said too much.

"You're keepin' tab on the kid," Charley Boggs said wonderingly, as if imparting some strange and unbelievable piece of news. He remembered himself, then, and said, "Well, you got to quit it! Get out of here, now, an' don't let me catch yuh prowlin' around again. You savvy, Buffalo?"

Buffalo didn't seem to hear. The baby had stopped crying, and the lights in Sarah Allen's house had gone out. Buffalo glanced briefly at the marshal, then turned away. In a moment he was lost in the shadows.

Charley Boggs stared after him, mouth open in wonderment. "Cripes!" he muttered. "I've seen some strange goin's-on in my time, but—" He looked toward the house, then, and shook his head uneasily. . . .

Having no faith that Buffalo Carrigan would take his warning to heart, the marshal of Green Springs decided that he himself would keep a watch on Sarah Allen's place. An hour after dark on the following night, he buckled on his guns, and with some reluctance headed toward the place.

He remembered, as he walked along, that he had seen very little of Buffalo Carrigan during the week after they had taken Honey from him. And when he had seen him, it seemed to the marshal that Buffalo had grown even more taciturn, more dangerous looking. Charley Boggs was no fool, and in a vague, faltering way, he understood why this might be so.

He understood dimly, too, why Green Springs hated Buffalo Carrigan; understood a little of how a thing like taking that child away from him might have disastrous effects. Buffalo Carrigan was a man capable of inflicting death and destruction upon anyone who opposed him. These things had been in the back of the marshal's head when he buckled on his gun belt. They were with him now as he walked along, and he was not happy, because he had never shared the general hatred of Buffalo Carrigan.

The marshal's train of thought was broken suddenly by a piercing feminine shriek from Sarah Allen's house.

"Damn!" Charley Boggs said, jerking his gun.

He bounded up the steps and through the open door. Sarah Allen's cries were still coming at him as he ran in, yelling, "What's goin' on here? What's the matter here?"

Sarah Allen came rushing out of a room to his right, babbling shrilly, "Marshal! Oh, thank the Lord you've come! That man—that horrible man! He broke in my house! Threatened to kill me! He's in there now!" She pointed with a trembling finger. "Oh, I thing I'm going to faint! You must arrest him! Send him to the penitentiary!"

Charley Boggs' lip curled and he muttered something that sounded like, "Cripes!" With the gun still in his hand, he stalked into the room Sarah had indicated.

Buffalo Carrigan stood in the center of the room, the baby in his arms. He was absolutely oblivious to anything else as he smiled down at the child. The baby was smiling back at him.

Charley Boggs watched the tableau a moment, confused by a welter of conflicting emotions. Then he said quietly, "All right, Buffalo, put her down an' come on."

Buffalo turned, frowning slightly at the interruption. He looked at the gun in Charley's hand, then into the marshal's face. Charley smiled, despite himself.

"Come on, Buffalo."

Gently, Buffalo laid the baby back in the box that served her as a bed. After a moment he turned to the marshal. Charley had put away his gun.

Sarah Allen stood in the doorway, watching them. "I was just going to the Civic Betterment meeting," she said shrilly, "when this—this monster broke into my house! Oh, it was awful! Marshal, he's a dangerous man!"

"Oh, shut up, Sarah," Charley Boggs said wearily. "Come on, Carrigan. A spell in the lock-up might cool you off."

Buffalo said nothing, but as he came abreast of Sarah, he stopped, glaring at her. She shrank against the wall, hand

flung up against her wide open mouth.

"If Honey cries again, an' I hear her, I'm comin' back," he said tonelessly, his huge bulk, towering over the cowering woman, shrinking her into insignificance.

"Buffalo!" the marshal snapped. "Get movin'!"

They went out of the house, Buffalo in the lead.

"I can't have this goin' on," the marshal said. "You'll be charged with breakin' an' enterin'. You're a damn fool, Carrigan. Why'd yuh do it?"

"She was cryin'," Buffalo muttered.

Charley Boggs cursed inwardly. Something was wrong here, awful wrong.

♣ ♣ ♣

BUFFALO'S cell window afforded him a view of Sarah Allen's house, bulking dimly in the starlit night. The place was dark now, though the night was still young, which meant that Sarah Allen had gone on to her meeting. Honey had been left alone in the house.

Alone, but not unwatched. The cell door had no sooner shut behind him than Carrigan was at the window, peering out. Charley Boggs, turning the key in the lock, smiled, glad he had remembered that this cell did afford that view.

Buffalo stood at the window for an hour, looking at the dark house, his mind a turmoil. The thought of what could happen to him, if the breaking and entering charge was pressed, hardly entered his mind. His worry was what might become of Honey.

He had watched the house for a full minute before the significance of the light that had suddenly appeared in the house dawned on him. It wavered fitfully, growing swiftly beneath his suddenly startled, horrified eyes. Fire!

He turned from the window, rushed to the cell door. "Boggs!" he roared, his voice like thunder. "Boggs! Fire! Fire!" He took hold of the barred door and rattled it until it seemed he would tear it from its foundation. "Fire! Fire!" His voice rolled and echoed, booming up and down the stone corridor.

Charley Boggs came on the run. "What the hell? What the hell do you—"

"Fire!" Buffalo roared at him.

"I don't see no fire."

"In the house! In the house where the baby is—it's on fire!" Buffalo strained madly at the bars. "Let me out! Let me out of here! I'll get her! Damn you, Boggs—"

"I'll take care of it," Boggs shouted, and raced off down the corridor.

Buffalo watched him go, suddenly realizing that he was still locked up. "Boggs!" he yelled. Then, aware of his helplessness, he flung away from the door, rushed to the window.

The fire had gained headway. The house must be tinder-dry, and to Buffalo's overwrought imagination it seemed that the whole interior of the place was one great seething mass of flame.

He rushed to the door again, shook it violently. "Boggs! Let me out! Let me out!"

A bell somewhere pealed violently, and Buffalo raced back to the window. He could hear shouts of alarm, and see dim figures running toward the burning house. He gripped the window bars, his fingers writhing. The fire was growing rapidly! Soon it would be out of control! It would be too late!

Sweat rolled down his face, and his

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eyes were wide and staring with a half-mad light. The picture of Honey, helpless in the midst of that roaring inferno, rose in his tortured mind, tearing a sob from his throat.

He raced back to the cell door. "Boggs!" he screamed. "Boggs, come back here and let me out!"

Then he was back at the window, staring at the fire. He saw figures, silhouetted in the glow, dashing about the house. He could see no sign that Honey had been rescued.

Sobbing, he rushed back to the cell door. Violently he gripped the bars. Sweat pouring down his face, the muscles in his powerful arms standing out like thick cords, he strained at the bars. Suddenly he leaped back, then ran forward, throwing himself violently against the bars. Pain splintered through his body, but he hardly noticed it.

Again and again he catapulted his huge bulk against the barred door. From outside he could hear vague shouts, dimly audible through the roaring in his own head. The skin on his upper arm broke under the terrible hammering he gave it against the bars, but the pain and blood went unnoticed.

Then he heard something snap. Sobbing, he grasped the bars, shook them with all the violence he could muster. The lock had broken and the door sagged open.

His shirt torn, blood running down his arm, his face wet with sweat and his hair a tangled damp mass, Buffalo rushed out of the jail into the street. He turned toward the burning house. In a matter of seconds he reached it.

Cursing, he slugged his way through the crowd that had gathered. The house was burning violently now, throwing off waves of scorching heat.

Buffalo spied Charley Boggs. "The baby!" he yelled. "Where—"

Boggs gaped at him. "How the hell—No, no! She's still there! Nobody can get in there! How'd you get out of jail?"

Blood drained from Buffalo Carrigan's face. He staggered a little. . . Honey still in there! No one had carried her out!

"Damn you!" he roared at the marshal. "Damn you all, you whining yellow-bellies!"

His last words were hardly audible, because he was running for the house, racing up the steps of the burning porch. Before they realized what had happened, he was gone into the inferno.

"Buffalo!" the marshal screamed. "Buffalo!" Charley Boggs sat down suddenly, too weak to stand.

♠ ♠ ♠

BUFFALO might as well have run straight into a corner of hell. All around him the flame crackled, roaring its hot defiance. Smoke enveloped him in thick swirls. The flames licked at him with hungry tongues.

Choking, he rushed into the room where he had found Honey earlier in the evening. It was a mass of flame.

"Honey!" he screamed. "Where are yuh?"

Smoke blinded him. The hair on his head and face and arms was singed and blackened. But the baby was not there!

"Oh, God," he prayed, "where is she?"

He turned, shielding his face, as he hurried out of the room. Time ceased to exist. The heat became a torture more hellish than any man could devise. It numbed him, as he staggered from room to room, looking, praying. Every room he entered was a raging furnace—but there was no sign of the baby in any of them!

Upstairs! he thought suddenly. The stairs were a pillar of flame. Sobbing, he started up. Now he was losing the power to think straight. The heat . . . the smoke! Stumbling, he reached the second floor, and as he did so the stairs behind him fell with a crash. The flame leaped

high, roaring hungrily for victims.

Like a madman, he rushed about the second floor, screaming her name.

He saw her suddenly, in the center of the last room his half-blinded eyes peered into.

"Oh, God!" he gasped.

Staggering through the flame, he fell beside the basket. Painfully he got up, and somehow got the basket into his arms. Then he stood wavering, hemmed in by flame. He remembered that the stairs had fallen behind him.

The flame roared closer. Buffalo looked down at the bundle in his arms. The baby looked up at him—and smiled!

He choked, and smiled back, his tortured eyes full of tears. "Honey, baby, I'll get you out."

There was only one way left. Through the wall of flame he saw a window, a closed window.

Shielding the child, he went through the flames to the window. Smoke had so seared his lungs that he no longer breathed, but gasped.

He flung the window open. Air rushed in, and a great billow of flame roared out behind him.

"Ahhhh!" he gasped, as the flame leaped at him. He got half out the window, dimly heard the cry of stunned wonder that came up from below. How he did it, he never knew, but suddenly he was dropping, dropping, and with the basket cushioned in his arms against the fall, he hit the ground. A sharp, agonizing stab of pain shot up his leg.

For a moment he lay dazed. Then, seemingly with superhuman will power, he staggered to his feet. All around him, people were yelling and talking. Step by step, he picked his way out of the heat, away from the flaming house.

"Gimme the kid!" a voice shouted in his ear. "Give her to me, Buffalo!"

Buffalo looked dazedly at Boggs.

"The doc's here," Charley said urgently. "He wants to look at you an' the kid. Give her to me, Buffalo."

"She's mine," Buffalo Carrigan said hollowly. "Nobody's gonna take her. Anybody tries—I'll kill 'em."

"Nobody's gonna take her!"

Buffalo looked at him searchingly. Apparently reassured by what he saw there, he smiled weakly. His hurt leg gave way and he fell, sinking into blackness.

♥ ♥ ♥

BUFFALO CARRIGAN straightened his black string tie, gave his unruly hair a final pat.

"Hurry, Uncle Buffalo! We mustn't be late."

Buffalo turned and smiled down on the pig-tailed little girl.

"You know we mustn't be late for church," she said seriously, wrinkling her little face into severity. "Now you hurry. Anyhow, you look fine."

"Thank you, Honey," Buffalo Carrigan said. "You look pretty nice yourself. Except for that smudge on your nose."

"Oh, Uncle Buffalo, there is not."

They went out of the house, turned and walked slowly toward the center of town. The sun shone brightly, and the air was sweet with the scent of sage. The same kind of morning, Buffalo Carrigan reflected, as when he had found the little lady beside him.

From his great height, he smiled down at her, closed his huge hand more tightly about her little one.

"We're havin' fried chicken for dinner," Buffalo said. "I sure hope he doesn't talk too long. I'm gettin' hungry already."

"Oh, Uncle Buffalo, you shouldn't say things like that," Honey reprimanded him. But she chuckled delightedly as she urged him to hurry his steps.

He turned and emptied his gun in a burst of wild shots.

Fourteen years below the Border had changed him, Mike Askew knew. But he wondered just how much, when he rode back to his war-torn home range, where they called him a coward -- to face the bullet storm with an empty gun!

SECOND-CHANCE HERO

By DABNEY OTIS COLLINS

MIKE ASKEW, his eyes thoughtful, read the sign nailed to the corner post of the section line fence:

Stranger, Don't Travel This Road

Without hesitation, he guided his long-barreled roan into the forbidden road. He couldn't be bothered worrying about signs now, after traveling across two states to reach this road.

He sat high and straight in the leather, a lean, hard-muscled man in his early thirties. Frosted hair showed above his bony temples. His gray eyes, set deep and slanted downward at the outer corners, were of a man who has seen all there is to see.

A low, wooded ridge marched to his left, laying its shadow across the road. The tall rider's gaze was on the sharply cut line that marked the crest of the ridge; his eyes narrowed as he saw a small, blocky shape slowly rear up from that jagged line. A man's shape. Askew stopped, pivoting from the waist, his gun leveled at the sentry's stomach.

"Don't shoot," the puncher called in a quick, strained voice. He lowered his rifle and stepped cautiously forward through the sumac and scrub maple—a lanky, loose-jointed kid of about sixteen, a sheaf of pale yellow hair extending from under his flat-crowned hat.

"Golly Moses!" he said in wide-eyed wonder. "You must have eyes in the back of your head, mister!" He added, with self-conscious authority, "Strangers ain't allowed in here."

The corners of Askew's solidly formed mouth lifted briefly. "How's the 4T makin' out against Bar B?"

"Makin' out all right, if it's any business of yourn." The kid spoke with sullen defiance.

"Glad to hear it, son." Mike Askew rode on, saying over his shoulder, "You can take me in."

The kid scowled, uncertain. He looked with close attention at the long-backed rider, then followed watchfully.

Coming over a rise in the sageland, Askew saw a distant cluster of buildings, corrals, and haystacks—the 4T spread. His eager gaze took in each detail of the peaceful scene: the log house with a porch across the front, the long, low bunkhouse, barns and blacksmith shop, the windmill, the cottonwood grove where Harley Toll lay buried. Nothing had changed. But he had. Fourteen years had changed him in more ways than one.

His eyes were darkened with many thoughts, and remorse chiseled deep lines in his weathered face. Suddenly he pulled his .45, spilled its load into the palm of his hand and dropped the cartridges into the left pocket of his coat. With incredibly fast motions, he reversed the procedure, reloading the gun and pointing it at an imaginary foe. Five times Askew emptied and filled the cylinders.

The kid, following at a careful distance, saw this queer action and was pleased. A gunman would come in mighty handy on the 4T, right now.

Askew's gaze swept in appraisal over the gray-green land, the smell of sage sweet in his nostrils. A warmth stirred pleasantly within him, for he was coming home.

Across the stillness broke a pistol shot, sudden and sharp. Now a volley of shots, rattling out from somewhere beyond the ridge. Askew stopped. The kid spurred for the low ridge.

"Bar B?" Askew called.

The kid topped the ridge and was gone. Askew followed. The roan's ground-eating stride brought him quickly abreast of the kid. They were on the rim of a deep wash.

The boy's glance at him was black with suspicion. "It's Dick Toll," he said, "takin' on two Bar B gunmen single-handed."

A look down there showed Askew what there was to see: the dull gleam of a water hole, the hats and shoulders of two men crouched behind boulders, facing each other across the pool. The third man in the fight he could not see. But that man saw him.

A bullet clipped his hat brim. At a shout from the hidden fighter, his companion glanced up and saw Askew. His gun hand jerked upward, and two shots roared out. The man behind the rock sank back. As another shot went wide of him, Askew wheeled back from the rim, searching for a way down.

"Thisaway!" the kid yelled shrilly, pointing.

Askew jumped his horse down the

steep, twisting cowpath, charged upon the water hole. He glimpsed a boy kneeling behind the boulder, before he hit the water. It was just a glance, but enough to tell him this was the son of Harley Toll.

Crashing the willows beyond the hole, he saw a rider rapidly climbing the wall. Askew's shout for him to stop was answered by a shot. Then the rider was out of the wash. He had a wide lead, when Askew reached the rim. But maybe not wide enough. Askew spoke urgently to his horse, and the big roan responded with a rippling surge of power. The pursued man turned and emptied his gun in a burst of wild shots, then bent low, both legs pumping in the rowels. A cold fury within him, Askew watched the distance between them grow less.

A rider appeared on his right, coming fast. Askew eyed this man with narrow attention. He reined in, rode slowly to meet him. He remembered the empty cylinders of his gun. Swiftly his hand flashed from coat pocket to gun. He holstered the reloaded weapon.

The two riders stopped when about ten feet apart. The short, heavy-set man said, "I see you gave yourself plenty time to reload."

"I don't need that much time, Kent." Askew eyed him closely. Kent Barbee had changed a lot. His face was broader, his chest had thickened amazingly during these fourteen years, and the jaunty confidence that Askew remembered in him had deepened into a plainly evident sense of power and driving ambition. Askew's gaze briefly touched the long, jagged scar almost in the middle of the man's forehead. He had put that scar there.

"You'd done better to stay away," Kent Barbee said.

"I stayed away too long, Kent."

"That's as it may be." Barbee smiled faintly. "I been hopin' I'd see you again."

"You see me now."

Ominous darkness overlaid the china-blue of Kent Barbee's small, shrewd eyes. His club-like right hand inched toward his hip, and stopped. He took one long look at Mike Askew, then turned his horse.

He gave no sign that he heard, when Askew said, "You got a dead hand down at the water hole."

♠ ♠ ♠

THEY stood about the dead man—Askew, the yellow-haired kid and young Dick Toll. "I caught 'em poisonin' my water," Dick Toll explained. He looked levelly at Askew. He put out his hand, and Askew gripped it. "Much obliged," he said.

"Golly Moses!" The kid was unable to pull his gaze from the crumpled shape behind the boulder. "Smack between the eyes!"

Watching Dick's face with attention that shut out all else, Askew introduced himself. Dick Toll gave no indication of having heard the name before. But, after all, he had been only six years old when it had happened. A tremendous load seemed to lift from Askew's shoulders. "I'd like to ride for the 4-T," he said.

Dick grinned. "You been hired," he said, "ever since I first saw you." He added gravely, "But I want you to know you're ridin' into one hell of a fight. Kent Barbee thinks this whole country belongs to him. He's been warrin' on us ever since I can remember, but here lately he's been tryin' to wipe us out."

"That's 'cause Dick's been beatin' the Bar B's britches off," the kid said proudly. "Payin' 'em back for gettin' his old man."

Askew glanced swiftly at young Toll, thankful that what he expected to see was not there.

"Let's ride," Dick said shortly. . . .

Askew unpacked his war sack and shoved it under the bunk. His gaze moved reminiscently around the long, empty room, old memories crowding his mind. Behind the rusty cannonball stove, in the wall where he had stuck it so long ago, hung the broken Spanish bit he and Harley Toll had found in Chimney Creek. He hung up his saddle rigging and led his horse off to pasture.

It was a good country, big and wide every way a man looked; a better country than any he had come across in his travels. In long, gentle sweeps the gray-green land rolled to the four horizons, broken here and there by an outcrop of red granite.

"Home," Askew murmured.

He turned his roan into the pasture. Toward him loped the kid, hazing a black horse which had a star-shaped blaze on its forehead. The black wheeled sharply away from the gate, its mane and tail flying, turned and eyed the stranger.

"How you like him?" the kid called eagerly. "Dick said to give you the best we got. His name's Star."

Askew nodded. He was looking at a freshly healed scar—a long welt laid down the glistening black withers and ending at the shoulder. The kid guessed what he was thinking.

"Bar B done that," he said soberly. "He was Curly's hoss. They got Curly."

"Looks like a good horse," Askew said.

He went thoughtfully toward the corral. Young Toll perched on the top rail, apparently waiting for him.

"All I can pay is regular wages," he said.

"That's O. K. with me. Only, I ain't what you'd call a gunman."

"I got my own ideas about that."

They fell silent, looking toward two riders loping in across the sage. Presently two more riders appeared. The four men unsaddled at the barn and came on, each with a rifle balanced in his hand, a gun at his hip. Askew saw only the wiry, white-mustached little man whose hat was pulled down over his eyes. A tightness gripped his stomach.

"Boys, meet Mike Askew," Dick introduced, "He's ridin' for us."

The men nodded briefly and went on. The little old man did not nod. He glanced at Askew—a swift, icy stare, and moved away without a word.

"Where's Tex?" Dick called after them.

"Seen him headin' over towards Chimney Crick a while back," one of the men answered. "Probably tailin' up a bogged-down critter."

When they were alone, Dick said, "That's all the 4T riders, 'ceptin' me and the kid. Old Jake, he's foreman. Been here since Nero was a pup."

♥ ♥ ♥

ASKEW was still looking at the slightly built, erect, quick-stepping figure. A frown dug itself between his eyes. After a while, he went to the bunkhouse. Old Jake, splashing water over his gray-stubbled face at the wash basin outside the door, did not look up. The others were lying on their bunks, smoking.

Askew sat down, feeling no friendliness here. If they knew of the fight at the water hole, none mentioned it. The foreman came in, crossed the room to a makeshift desk, touched a match to the lamp and began to copy from his tally book into a dog-eared journal. There was a feeling of waiting in this room.

Suddenly one of the men stood up, strapping on his gun as he strode to the door. "Wait, Clem." The other two went with him into the thickening darkness.

Askew looked intently at the sharp-angled profile of the man bent over the desk, his thoughts back-trailing. Old Jake

it had been even then, when Mike Askew and Harley Toll settled in this bunchgrass country. A cowman, from the soles of his boots to the peak of his Stetson. Time was, when he and Askew had been close friends. But that was before that fatal night in Starbuck.

Old Jake stuffed the tally book in his pocket and clumped past Askew out of the room. Askew followed, into the kitchen of the log house. Dick motioned him to one of the pine benches running the length of the table. The foreman went right to work. Only once did he glance at Askew—a rapier stab of warning. Dick and the kid fiddled with their food. Finally there came the sound for which all were listening. The kid went hurriedly to the door. He turned, smiling.

"Tex's all right," he said. "Four hosses comin'."

"Tex never did know when to call it a day." Dick bit into a chunk of beef.

The horses stopped outside, leather creaked, and Clem stood blinking in the light. He did not say anything; it was in his face. A glance flashed around the table. Dick and the kid stood up, but Askew and Old Jake did not move. Clem stepped aside as his two companions entered the room's stillness, straining on the weight between them. They laid the dead man on the bed in the spare room.

"Winchester ball in the back of his head." Clem's voice sounded loud.

Old Jake got slowly to his feet. "We're in this fight to the last man," he stated, his tones peculiarly flat. "We got to stick together. There ain't room on the 4T for a man that runs out on his pardner." He leveled an ice-blue gaze at Askew. "I mean you."

"But gosh, Jake, he—"

Dick cut in on the kid. "Mike Askew saved my life today," he said quietly. "I say he can fight. What makes you say he can't?"

"If he stays, I go."

Askew was quick to see suspicion harden the features of the three punchers. He was a stranger, and they had every reason to distrust strangers. Plainly, they would follow Old Jake's lead. Askew stood up, Dick's and the kid's expectant gaze on him. He had decided what he must do. He stepped across the bench and started to the door.

Only the kid spoke. "I'll be damned," the kid said.

Askew got his saddle and gun and went toward the pasture. As he passed the corral, the little foreman suddenly appeared beside him.

"Wait," said Old Jake. "I jest wanter tell you Dick don't know 'bout you. I never mentioned your name to him, or anybody else." He stopped, then asked: "How come you to know about Bar B warrin' on us?"

"Feller from up this way told me. Stopped by my shack one night, down in New Mexico."

"You own a spread down there?" Old Jake asked.

"I did. A little one. Well, what you want?"

"You rid quite a piece," Old Jake allowed, then was silent for so long that Askew again started away. "I ain't holdin' it ag'in you, any more'n I kin help," the old man said. "I wisht I could forget, but I can't. I kin still see it all, jest like 'twas yesterday. You and me and Harley in front of that barber shop, Kent Barbee and four of his skunks acrost the street, shootin' 'er out. A ball splinters Harley's gun arm, and he's through. I have my hands full, right then. But you—you can't load your gun! You could've saved Harley. But you couldn't load your gun. All you could do was throw it at Barbee. You was so scared you couldn't reload—when the lead was flyin'." He shook his head. "No. I never will forget it."

"Do you think I've forgotten it?" Askew demanded in cold fury.

"Reckon you ain't. But if you was even half the man Harley thought you was, you never would of stood for that talk I handed you in the kitchen." Old Jake turned abruptly away.

♦ ♦ ♦

ASKEW caught his roan and headed west. He stopped once and looked back at the ranch buildings huddled under the dim wash of the stars.

The Bar B ranchhouse was dark. He rode toward the shadowy oblong of the bunkhouse. A man came out of the barn, and Askew turned that way.

"Howdy," he said. "I'm lookin' for Kent Barbee."

"He ain't here."

"Which way did he ride?"

"Who the hell wants to know?"

"Mike Askew. That's me. One of your men here knows me—the one that come back from that water hole. Where's Barbee?"

The cowboy stood very still, and what lay in his hat-shadowed face Askew could not see. Then came the quiet answer: "Starbuck."

Askew loped out of the yard. Wheeling into the county road, he turned, seeing dark shapes of men piling from the bunkhouse door. That settled the doubt in his mind. Barbee was in Starbuck. Apparently his gun-slinging riders were eager to welcome this opportunity to avenge the death of one of their number.

He raced through the night, the roan's feet beating out a solid roll of thunder. And now, as he flashed past the 4T side road, Askew hummed a few bars of a song that rose from somewhere out of the past. A mysterious warmth filled him, and he was closer to happiness than he had known. Closer too, it seemed, to Harley Toll.

Hearing the shrill call of his name, he looked back. A rider drove hard at him. It was Dick. "Don't stop," he warned. "They're after you."

Askew slowed his horse.

The boy rode closer. "Come on! I'm goin' with you to Starbuck. Barbee's there, ain't he? I knew somethin' was wrong with you, there at the table. After you'd rode off towards Bar B, I made Old Jake tell me. He told me the whole thing." Dick hesitated, and now he spoke more quietly. "That's all water under the bridge now, Mike. I never did hold it against the feller who couldn't load quick enough to save my dad. And I know my dad never did. Let's ride!"

"No, Dick. This is my job. I been waitin' for it a long time."

Askew rode away from him, fast. He stopped once to listen, but heard only the distant sound of the oncoming Bar B riders. . .

Except for dim splashes of light from a few windows, Starbuck's street was as dark as the frame buildings squatting at its edges. The town, thought Askew, as he looped the reins over a hitchrack, seemed smalled than it used to be. He moved along the uneven boards toward a lighted building at whose corner hung a sign of a silver dollar. With lifted head and resolute step, he strode into the saloon.

Two punchers lounged at the bar. There were three other men in the room, playing a desultory game of cards. The punchers looked quickly toward the door. The smaller of them eyed Askew with a burning intensity, then busied himself with his drink. Askew recognized him as the Bar B rider who had escaped from the scrap at the water hole.

"Lookin' for somebody?" the barkeep inquired.

Askew answered "No," and went out. He spun round, peering through the slats. The two men had left the bar and were taking long steps toward the back door. Askew walked into the street, faced the saloon and drew his gun.

The oncoming hoofbeats, less than a mile away now, drew his concentrated attention. Up the street a door opened. A man's bulk, black and sinister, showed Kent Barbee!

♣ ♣ ♣

ASKEW moved along the middle of the street toward Barbee. Before him the town pump took shape.

A shot from behind him sliced through the stillness. He turned, saw nothing. A white flash bit the darkness, and he fired at it. Now two lances of flame pointed at him from the opposite side of the street. Even as he turned, Askew realized that those first shots had been to trick him into betraying his position. He was caught between three guns.

Askew's hammer clicked on an exploded cap. Swift and sure, while blue whistlers cut close, he fed cartridges to his gun. In exultation he targeted his aim on a powder flash. Then a force like the kick of a mule struck his shoulder, slamming him to his back in the dust.

Thunder in his ears, sick, he struggled to his knees. Bar B horses, that's what the roaring was. He saw them now, bobbing rapidly toward him.

"The water trough!"

Where the thought came from, Askew never knew. He forced himself up, fell, rose again and staggered toward the pump. In his left side there was no life, but his gun hand was rock-steady as he triggered shots at the flashes of the two guns that sought to cut him down. He stumbled upon the trough, dropped behind its thick pine wall.

"Kent!" a man called. The horses had stopped.

"Over there near the well," Kent Barbee answered. "Get him!"

Askew waited, his lower lip vised be-

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tween his teeth, for his pain was pure hell. A red-tongued volley leaped at him. Crouched behind the trough, he shot back, knowing his number was up.

Askew drew himself to his knees, tumbled over into the trough. The few inches of cold water swelled about his body, feeling good. Cautiously he lifted his head. A bullet-driven splinter slashed his scalp. Blood filled his eyes. He became dizzy.

Askew's cold fingers clamped his gun. He knelt in the trough, driving his uncertain gaze into the murk of crimson-slashed darkness. The heavy roar of .45's destroyed all other sound. But the Bar B men were not coming at him! This was another fight. Then it dawned on his befogged brain that Dick Toll had brought in the 4T for the showdown.

Askew leaped from the trough, running twistedly toward the shooting. "Dick!" he called.

No one could hear him. A crouched figure passed him on the run, turned quickly, peering up into Askew's face. He cursed, his arm jerked up. Askew shot, and the man jack-knifed, clamping both hands to his stomach.

"Good work, old-timer!" That was the kid.

Askew whirled on him. "Where's Dick?"

'Silver Dollar!"

Askew gained the sidewalk, and now he saw Dick, diving through the Silver Dollar's batwings. He flung himself through the door, struck blind for a moment by the light. There was Dick on the floor, dazed, blood running from a gash in his temple—and Kent Barbee standing over him with a naked gun.

"Barbee!"

The stocky man turned, panther-quick for all his weight, and the gleam in his close-lidded eyes was wicked. Askew aimed directly between those eyes and let the hammer go. There was no sound, except a metallic *click*.

The terrible specter of that other fight took hold of Askew. It whipped back his arm. Another instant, and the hurled gun would crash into Barbee's face. Then, incredibly, Askew laughed—a sound like the ringing of a bell.

He swept down his upraised arm and reached into his pocket for a bullet. Barbee fired, point-blank at Askew's head. Too sure of himself, perhaps, he missed. There was one thought only in Askew's brain: he would load that gun even though he were dead on his feet. Barbee's carefully aimed second shot flattened against his breastbone, slicing inward. Askew's knees buckled under him. He started to the floor.

But he was still forcing that cartridge into the cylinder. Icy sweat glistened on his forehead. His face was gray. He could not see distinctly. With a last gathering of his strength, he pulled the trigger, and struck the floor on his face and rolled quietly over, beside Barbee.

♠ ♠ ♠

HE LAY on the pool table. A stout bald man, whose eyes behind his glasses were very bright, was wrapping up his instruments with an air of satisfaction. Dick and Old Jake stood on each side of the table.

"Kent's dead," Dick said, his voice unsteady. "Bar B's finished. You did a swell job, Mike. I know dad's plenty proud of you tonight. You always got a home on the 4T."

Old Jake cleared his throat. "That's right, Mike. Always a home for you. Wouldn't be a-tall surprised to see you an' Dick pardner up some day."

Mike smiled faintly. "Empty gun, and all?"

"You bet!" they both answered.

A wolf made a desperate leap for Rolf's throat, but he flung it off with a desperate sweep of his arm.

ONLY THE BRAVE CAN BE FREE

★ ★ ★ By JIM KJELGAARD

The blood of freedom-loving Danish forebears ran hot in Rolf Olsen's veins, so he turned his back on his bride-to-be and her handsome homestead dowry, and treked, alone, into the Northwest's white wilderness hell - - - to fight for his life's stake like a man!

IT was still dark. The bell on the neck of the bull tinkled as he walked up from the pasture at the head of the four heifers driven by the black dog, Jon.

It did not seem, Rolf Olsen reflected, different than any other morning. Except . . . He put out a hand to touch the two pack-laden oxen, standing quietly beside him.

Elisha Benton stepped from the barn and extended a hand. "Goodbye, Rolf. The best of luck to you."

Rolf shook the proffered hand. "Goodbye. I'll get in touch with you."

"Do that," Elisha said, and stepped back.

The light shining through the windows of the house leaped in a higher and wider rectangle as the door opened. Faith Benton was outlined in it. The door closed again, and Rolf knew that she was coming toward the barn to bid him goodbye.

A minute later Rolf saw her head and the slimness of her upper body through the rapidly graying morning. It was curious, as though that part of her was distinct from all the rest. Her deep black hair was tumbled and had fallen about her face. Her lips were parted in a half smile. She came close to him.

"Goodbye, Rolf," she said steadily. "May all good things come your way."

Rolf struggled to recall his carefully-planned farewell speech. He wanted mightily, in this last moment, to make her understand that he was going because he must — and hoped desperately that she would change her mind and come with him. But the dream of his own farm, now that Faith was near him for the last time, was without savor. He did not blame her for not wanting to leave the security of her father's home to cast her fortunes with his in an unknown wilderness. He wanted to say. "I'm not going. The only important thing in the world is having you." But, though all this was in his mind, he found no words to utter it. He took her hand.

"Thanks," he said. "You'll be hearing from me."

"I hope so."

Rolf turned away. He wanted to run, to hurry to some place where he could think clearly. But all he did was slap the oxen on their bony rumps and start the cattle moving. He was around the barn when he heard Elisha shout, "Bring the milk pails with you, Faith?"

The old familiar heard words startled him. The milking on Elisha's farm went on, though it seemed worlds were falling. Certainly he seemed worlds away from those two in the barn, who did not understand. They had reasoned with him, pointing out that one day Faith would have Elisha's fine farm on the lower Mandanago. If he married Faith, he would be master of it.

Rolf himself was not quite sure what it was they didn't comprehend. He knew only that he would not be a leech, fastening himself on to life and sucking what other men had gained. He knew that he could never place any proper value on Elisha's farm if it came to him so easily. He had to get a farm himself, to feel it and be of it as he could never feel or be of anything for which he did not fight.

It was not a new urge, this overpowering impulse that pounded within him and made him turn from ease, comfort, and the arms of the girl he loved to the uncertainties of the northern wilderness. Six years ago it had driven him from his father's farm on the coast of Denmark to America, where the broad acres of a Long Island farm had been a never-ending miracle. There had been fertile land, plenty of cattle, and all the work a husky youth could do. But there was within him a driving urge to be his own master. He couldn't be that on Long Island. It would take him half a life-time to earn money enough to buy as much land as he wanted.

A year ago, heading for the Northwest, where there was endless land for the taking, he had come to the village of West Eaton, driving ahead of him four five-month old calves and two oxen. He had intended to stay two nights at the most, but he had met Faith Benton and stayed a year.

Now he was moving again, the big bull,

Thor, added to his herd. As he plodded behind the cattle he wondered why he had tossed aside what numberless men would have fought for.

As the day wore on, the routine and labor of the march dulled the keenest memories. When night came Rolf made a fire on the bank of the Mandanago. It was there he got his first taste of what his torment was to be whenever physical action was not present to stifle memories. The vision of Faith arose in the corkscrew of smoke that curled from his fire.

And, when he finally sought his blanket, the last thing he saw was her outline in the star-studded sky.

♦ ♦ ♦

ROLF was glad when it was morning. He cooked and ate breakfast and adjusted the packs on the backs of the patient oxen. Aside from the cattle themselves, the packs the oxen carried held all he owned in the world except the most precious of his goods, a measure of wheat seed, one of corn, and his powder and shot which he carried himself.

He didn't know, exactly, where he was going. Just Northwest, where there was land for men to clear. Marvelous tales of fertile soil and vast forests had drifted from the wilderness to West Eaton. He and Faith could do wonderful things there. They—Rolf checked himself. But Faith had refused to go with him.

He started the great bull up the Mandanago. The heifers, after standing uncertainly for a moment, fell in behind the bull. The oxen, long accustomed to being man's work beasts and not resentful, brought up the rear. Rolf slipped the pack over his shoulders. For just one moment more he stood by the dead ashes of the camp fire that seemed to exemplify with just a little more finality the cold remains of his dearest hopes.

For two days he drove his cattle past farms and through villages where he was stared at curiously. The farms and villages were much like those surrounding West Eaton yet, only two days away, there was a subtle change that could be more sensed than seen. The country was newer. There were more log houses and barns. Even the boats on the Mandanago seemed more eager, as though they were hurrying to come to grips with primeval things and new scenes.

In mid-morning of the third day he turned his herd away from the Mandanago up the valley of a little stream that emptied into it. The river swung east here, and northwest was the direction Rolf wanted to travel. The farms along the stream were fewer; nearly all buildings were made of logs. The farmers' fields were hacked and raw and studded with stumps.

By the beginning of the afternoon Rolf was in unbroken forest. It was spring. Nothing was alone. A cock grouse, ruff extended, bowed and curtsied beneath a branch on which sat an indifferent hen. The sleek doe that bounded across his line of march had a tiny, spotted fawn at her heels. Rabbits frisked in the thickets, two by two. It deepened his misery. Rolf had hoped to find surcease in the forest. Now he knew that he would never find it.

The next morning he crossed a divide at the head of the creek up which he had traveled. The divide, an obstruction between himself and the lower Mandanago, seemed to shut him out of everything there.

On the eighteenth day after leaving West Eaton, Rolf came to the mountains he sought. Behind him lay a trail of hardship. He had driven the cattle northwest from the divide into another range of hills, had forded rivers, crossed countless swamps and bogs.

Now, at last, rolling away beneath his feet, was the promised land. He climbed a tree on the rim of a mountain, and from

this vantage point saw endless leagues of other mountains rising from sheltered valleys and covered with an unbroken blanket of tall pines and hemlocks. It was the country he had heard vague tales of, the one he had dreamed about six years before when he had tended his father's cattle on the cramped and crowded coast of Denmark.

In the valley below him lay a village. Rolf descended the tree. The cattle were pitifully thin. Every rib on the heifers stood out. The long hair on their flanks and heads only emphasized their gauntness. The bull's thick skin hung in loose folds on his mighty frame. He was sullen and angry, prone to make savage little rushes at either Rolf or the dog when they came near. Once more Rolf started the unwilling herd. He took them down the mountain, forded a sparkling creek at its foot, and bedded them in the forest a mile beyond. At nightfall he went to the village.

It was as different from the villages of the farm lands as they were from the city of New York. Fifteen log houses clustered beside a wagon track. The village was dark except for one dimly lighted house in the center. Rolf groped his way there and entered. It was a tavern. A dozen roughly-dressed men were bunched around the bar. Another, a big man with a flowing beard and long hair, leaned against one of the posts that supported the roof. Rolf accosted him.

"Do you live here?"

The man glared. "Do I look like I do?"

"You might," Rolf answered. "What town is this?"

"You lookin' for a fight?" the man demanded.

"Now, now. I'm a stranger here."

"Oh." The man became suddenly affable. "This yere is Marbury. It's got the drinkin'est men, the best fishin', the tamest bears, the least wimmen, the cantankerousest wolves, an' the most deer of any place this side of hell or creation. I'm Ike Selby."

"What's the country around and who owns it?"

Ike Selby waved an airy hand to the four corners of the earth. "Mountings an' timber. It don't belong to nobody except whoever kin take it. Help yourself."

Rolf returned to the cattle and bedded beside them. He was up with the dawn, urging his herd northwest once more. For two days he lolled along, giving the cattle a chance to graze and looking for a spot to settle. In the middle of the third day he crossed a divide, and struck down the course of a little creek that grew larger the farther he traveled. Eight miles down he broke from the forest into a clearing, and knew that he would have to stay there. Summer was at its height. The cattle must be wintered through.

THE clearing was a natural meadow, more than a mile long and varying from five hundred feet to half a mile wide. On both sides of the creek, it extended at its widest parts clear across the creek valley. Rich, wild hay grew in every part of the meadow, and at the bottom of it were six beaver dams. Tall hills rose protectingly on either side.

Rolf unpacked the oxen. With his axe he cut a few saplings and fashioned a small lean-to, which, when covered with strips of white birch bark, formed a rain-proof shelter that would protect his goods until he had time to make a better. The wild grass was ripening fast. In a little while it would wither on the stalk and be unfit for hay.

He made a handle for one of the scythes that the oxen had carried in their packs, and from daylight to dark mowed grass. Great windrows of it he cut, leaving it on the ground until it was dry, then raking it into piles. When he had enough cut he

made a sled from green trees and a yoke for the oxen. Uncomplainingly they bent themselves to toil again. Within three weeks he had four great piles of hay, tons in each pile, stacked close to the site he had selected for his barn.

The cattle grew fat in the grass, and the bull became placid again. There was no work for them now, only for their master and the oxen. Rolf started the herculean task of building the barn. For seven days he worked sixteen hours a day cutting and shaping logs. The oxen dragged them together when he had enough.

He could not make the barn as big as he would have liked, but he could make it tight and dry. He built the foundation of logs, laid rectangularly. With the aid of more logs, used as skids, and the help of the oxen, he raised the wall of the barn seven feet high. The roof was of split logs, laid across the rest. The roof logs were covered three feet deep with grass.

Then to the beaver dams with the oxen and the sled to haul mud. It was thrown over the grass on the roof, baked by the sun, and another layer added. It was plastered into every crack and crevice until the barn was weather proof and air tight. Rolf worked himself thin. His belly contracted until he could almost encircle it with his two hands, but by the time the first frost whitened the now dry grass the barn was finished. It had three swinging windows that could be opened to admit light and air, and a door that hung on elkskin hinges. His cattle were well provided for. Now he could think of himself.

He did not need a very pretentious habitation. A lean-to built against the side of the barn with a bunk and a stone fire place served the purpose. When that was finished he went forth with his rifle and shot three deer, an elk, and three bears, and gathered as many berries and nuts as he could.

By the time the first coating of shell ice gleamed on the edges of the creek he was ready for the winter and all it would bring. For twenty miles in every direction from his barn he ranged, building a line of deadfalls. Marten and fisher were abundant. Every day he saw mink and otter on the creek, and foxes were plentiful. Furs were valuable, but it was not entirely for their value that he trapped them. Physical action, sheer brute work, and that alone stole memories of Faith Benton, who should be with him and was not.

The heifers and the bull grazed every day in the meadow. Rolf did not know exactly what to expect in this new country, and it was well to let them forage as long as they could find grass. Before spring he might need all of the hay he had cut, and more too.

He spent half an hour every night with the cattle when he arrived home. A slight, almost balmy breeze had been ruffling the tops of the trees and the dead grass for three days, and the sky was overcast. There was a storm in its womb, but Rolf did not think that it would come immediately. The cattle could stay out until he was forced to take them in.

Then one night the cattle chose their beds. With the dog at his heels Rolf entered the lean-to and prepared and ate his supper of fried venison and one small cake of the precious store of flour he had brought with him. For an hour after eating he sat before the fire working on a pair of snowshoes. Jon crouched on the floor with his head on his paws when Rolf sought his bunk.

♠ ♠ ♠

HE was awakened in the middle of the night by the anxious whining of the dog. He rose in his bed, and threw more wood on the fire. By the leaping flames he saw Jon, his huge shadow cast against the opposite wall, pawing at the door. Rolf swung from his bunk. Outside the wind screamed about

the eaves of the barn and lean-to. Crisp flakes of snow pattered against the walls.

Rolf put on his warmest clothing, and took his best axe from its pegs on the wall. A storm had gathered while he slept. The cattle would have to be herded into the barn.

When he went outside the gale tore his breath away. For a moment he cowered in the shelter of the lean-to walls. Already snow was inches deep on the ground, and the storm had not reached its peak. Something brushed his legs. He reached down an exploring hand and encountered the woolly mane of the dog.

He hesitated a moment before venturing forth. Even a dog's nose might fail in such a storm, and besides the possibility of failing to find the cattle, they might not even be able to find their way back to the barn. His hand wrapped in the dog's shaggy ruff, axe clutched in the other hand, he plunged into the storm. The cattle were helpless.

The wind seized him as soon as he left the shelter of the barn walls, and whipped him half around. With an effort he oriented himself and kept going. The dog surged directly into the teeth of the wind. Rolf breathed a silent prayer of thanks for Jon. He was a good dog.

Snow drove into his face. He took a scarf from his pocket and covered his face until only his eyes were exposed. Not that eyes were much good. He could see nothing and was conscious of nothing save the need to get his cattle to shelter. They could not survive more than a single day if left out.

He was lost, completely lost. When he thought he was in the place where the cattle had bedded he stretched forth a hand and encountered a tree trunk. For a moment panic gripped him. There had been no trees where he had last seen the cattle. But he was reassured as Jon pressed a hard muzzle against his thigh and whined. Jon would find the cattle if they were to be found. Certainly he could not expect them to remain in an open meadow in such a storm. They would drift, and once started, they might drift a long way.

His feet grew numb. He thought for awhile that they must be frozen, but he wiped the thought from his mind. Jon had set his course with the wind—that was the logical way. Cattle would drift with it. But it seemed that he had come a long way from the barn, and must find them soon. The icy breath of the storm sapped his strength and courage.

He groped his way from tree to tree, and suddenly was among a grove of thick little pines. The smaller trees, with branches closer to the ground, broke the force of the wind so that it did not bite so harshly. Rolf straightened gratefully. It was a tremendous relief to be able to draw a full breath again. In the middle of the little pines he came on his cattle. They huddled together in a compact bunch, all save one of the oxen that detached itself from the herd and pressed to his side. It was trembling violently.

Jon snarled, and pressed from Rolf's side to a place at the head of the cattle. The great bull bawled deeply in his throat.

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Rolf strove to pierce the wall of storm-lashed blackness that faced him on every side. There was some unknown peril out there that was just beginning to make itself evident. It must have arrived at almost exactly the same time he had.

♥ ♥ ♥

ROLF stumbled to one of the trees. Crawling under it, he broke off an arm-full of the lower branches that were dead from lack of sun. The tree shook violently as the ox crowded against it. With the branches in his arms, Rolf made his way back to the herd. He scuffed the snow away, and laid the branches down.

He knelt with flint and steel in hand. The spark struck into the dry branches, glowed hotly for a moment, almost went out, then crackled on a twig and climbed into leaping life. Rolf heaped more wood on, and stood erect. One of the heifers broke from the herd. At the very edge of the circle of light cast by the fire, a ghostly shape darted forth and the heifer was down. Hamstrung, she kicked herself around and around in a dizzy circle until another wraith paused at her throat. Then she lay still.

Rolf worked his hand about the haft of the axe. The darting shapes were timber wolves, down from the north on the wings of the storm. Huge beasts, they had found easy prey that they would not abandon in the helpless cattle, and they did not seem much afraid of man-scent.

Rolf pushed at the ox, but he could not budge it. Always it had looked to him for food and drink, and now it was looking to him for protection. Snarling defiance, Jon leaped a dozen paces from the fire. The wolves drew back before him, but when Rolf whistled the dog to his side, they came and sat in the outer circle of light.

As the night passed, and nothing sprang from the fire to harm them, the wolves grew bolder. They began advancing.

The heifers plunged nervously. Jon padded quietly about them, and his familiar presence pacified them at bit. But the wolves were inching nearer. Rolf had believed that all wild beasts were afraid of man. But these wolves were vicious, unafraid. If he was not able to kill one soon, all would surge in. All the cattle would die.

Rolf's mind grew numb and weary, but clung to hope. A wolf made a sudden leap for Rolf's throat but he flung it off with a desperate sweep of his arm. His cattle must not die before wild fangs. The wolves, in a sudden flutter of padded paws, flashed forward. The great bull, Thor, bellowed his rage and bent his head to charge. From the corner of his eye Rolf saw Jon lock himself in combat with a wolf. Then, his axe flailing, he was beside the bull.

He sank the axe into a furred skull, and withdrew it to strike again. A gusher of blood spattered over his legs as the wolf he had just killed fell across his feet. He whirled to strike at a wolf that was about to slash at the tendons in the bull's hock. Thor received another on his horns. Then, suddenly, they were gone.

The storm abated with daylight. Rolf leaned heavily on his axe. A wild exhilaration gripped him, and his feet seemed to have no weight as he walked around the cattle and started them toward the barn. He had done what he had set out to do. With his own strength, and the strength of his dog and bull, he had fought for and won his own land. He knew an overwhelming flood of power, a sense almost of intoxication, as in one strong sweep he comprehended all the significance of what he had done here, what remained to be done.

This, in time, would be a much better and richer land than that owned by Elisha Benton. There was a wealth of timber surrounding it, and a growing country

needed that timber. Rolf thought of the old country, his own home and all those places where conditions were infinitely worse. He foresaw the great immigration that would take place, men and women flocking to America because they were denied opportunity in their home lands, bringing with them new life, new vitality, and new ideas that would make the new land incredibly wealthy — the mightiest power on earth. Many of them would lack money, and would not be able to get a foothold in the settled parts of America. They would flock to such land as surrounded his barn and lean-to. During Rolf's life time he would see this country settled, covered with peaceful, prosperous farms and villages.

The great elation that was on him expanded boundlessly when he herded his cattle into the barn, fed them, and closed the barn door. He had been up most of the night, but he was not tired. He entered the lean-to, put the axe down, and stood in front of the fire place looking at it. Faith Benton. . . . He would go back to West Eaton in the spring and tell her of this marvelous place. He was not troubled any more, but certain that she would come back with him. Before he had been able only to promise her that he might do things. Now he could offer her the proof that he had done things, had won and could hold his land and could offer a safe, secure home. Maybe he could persuade Elisha to sell his farm and bring his stock here where a man-sized job awaited a man. In the spring Rolf would have more cattle, plowed and planted fields, more land. . . . In a sudden burst of happiness he leaped forward and seized the axe. That in his hand, he started toward the forest.

When Faith was with him he would need a bigger house, too. And he had better start building that right away.

WAGONS AWAY!

The new serial by H. Bedford-Jones —is a rip-roaring saga of the fabulous days of the Argonauts when that bucking empire builder, the prairie schooner, was opening up the great new West; and of such men as young Morgan Wright whose heart was fired by the tales of One-eye Potts—of "gold and Injuns and the murderous Nighthawks . . ."

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On Sale Now!

DOC WONG DIGS A GRAVE

By RALPH BERARD

Burdin and Atroy were hell-raisers who liked nothing better than to come into a place with Colts blazing. . . .

Ling Ha Wong, Oriental sawbones, answered two robbing hardrock white men's order: "Cough up your gold - - - or else!" with four Chinese candles - - - and a box of American dynamite!

A SCREAM echoed up and down Prospect Creek and the false dawn air seemed to tremble with it. The Chinese quarter of the tiny mining camp of Nugget awoke suddenly. The

venerable gambler, Ling Ha Wong, aroused from peaceful, conscience-free slumber, leaped from his comfortable bed, a frown on his usually bland face.

In a many-colored kimono and loose-heeled slippers, he rushed outside, squished and splattered a hundred yards through the dim light of coming day—then almost stumbled over a prostrate body.

His countryman, little Ling Le Sing, lay face down in the mud. Blood still flowed from many wounds, wounds that had been cut inches deep through the shreds of the little man's pajamas by blackjack blows. Wong knelt and felt for the pulse. He feared Lee Sing was dead.

In the growing light a stubby little white man hobbled from a shack near the creek. He was clad in a soiled, well-worn sailor's uniform.

"What happened, Wong? What was the yelling?" Ben Clark snapped.

Wong released Lee Sing's wrist. His face was without expression when he looked up. "Help carry Lee Sing to Wong's humble dwelling?" he requested.

They picked up the broken body, and as they did so a great green parrot leaped from the doorstep of the sailor's shack and followed them, half running, half flying, and screeching: *"Aach! Aach! Aach!"* It leaped up and clawed a hold on Clark's shoulder, cocked its head sidewise and squawked: *"Aach! Murder! Murder! Aach!"*

Wong said, "Your smart bird is right, Ben Clark. Murder!"

"Is he dead?" Clark asked.

"He will die," Wong said.

They laid Lee Sing on Wong's bed. Wong directed Clark to start a fire and heat water. Then, his slipper-flaps clopping against his heels, his kimono flying in the breeze, he hurried outside to his garden. He returned with many varieties of fresh vegetables and moments later was forcing hot broth between the dying Chinaman's pale lips. And it helped him.

Soon Lee Sing's eyelids fluttered. He opened his eyes briefly and whispered to Wong in his native tongue. Then he gulped once and died.

Wong looked at Clark, who was one of his best friends. "Clad Burdin and Flint Atroy came to Sing's cabin in the night," he said. "They beat him till he told where his gold was hidden beneath the floor, then left him for dead."

Ben Clark was silent a long moment. The parrot, still clinging to his shoulder, blinked its yellow eyes sleepily.

"Wong," Clark said at last, "we've got to do something about those two renegades. They'll take all the gold in this end of town and kill or drive out all you Chinks."

Wong nodded solemnly. He stepped forward and opened the door of the cabin. A crowd of his countrymen stood outside in stoic silence, waiting.

Wong said simply, "Ling Lee Sing is dead. Clad Burdin and Flint Atroy killed him."

Burdin and Atroy were two hell-raisers who liked nothing better than to come into a place with Colts blazing—and the Devil take any man who got in the way of their lead.

The silence of the crowd remained unbroken. It dissolved, each little yellow man going to his separate cabin, hiding his fear behind a stoic countenance. Wong turned back inside.

"Ben Clark," he said, "you help Wong again?"

♥ ♥ ♥

"HELL, yes," the sailor said, and grinned. He had jumped ship at San Francisco, packed tools, blankets and a case of dynamite on a mangy little jackass, and come to Nugget to find gold, as many of the Chinese had done. A few weeks before he had

helped Wong save the life of a little Chinese cook named Sing Wah, who had deserted from the same ship. Several white renegades had framed Sing Wah, and would have hanged him to get his gold claim, but for the timely interference of Ben Clark and his very noisy parrot mascot.

In saving Sing Wah, Clark had gained both the lasting animosity of the white miners and the loyal friendship of the Chinese gambler, Wong. He chose, now, to live in the Chinese section of the town rather than among the low-grade of whites who were exploiting the rich placer workings higher up the creek.

"Burdin and Atroy will be after my gold next—or yours," Clark told Wong.

"You speak with a far-seeing tongue," Wong said. He poured a glass of foul-smelling herb tea, which he had made from his vegetables. "Drink," he said to Clark. Wong was something of a doctor. Clark had been badly addicted to alcohol and Wong was trying to break him of the habit with his smelly potions.

Clark made a wry face, grinned and drank the medicine. As he did Wong briefly outlined a weird defense for the danger that faced them. "You must keep away from whiskey," he said, "if we are to keep knives from our backs."

They went outside. Wong called together several of his countrymen. "Dig a grave for Lee Sing," he instructed. "Ben Clark will tell you where to dig and how deep. We bury Lee Sing with celestial rites; he came from the same province as Confucius."

A little later Wong stepped up to the tiny cook, Sing Wah, who was among the grave-diggers. "Sing Wah, Sing Wah!" he exclaimed excitedly. "You are sick man. You have been drinking bad water. I see in your eyes you have yellow fever."

Sing Wah was already half sick thinking what might happen to him for entering California without proper papers. The worried look on Wong's face, and Wong's fingers on his pulse, turned his yellow countenance an even more sickly hue.

"Oh, why did I ever leave China?" he whimpered. "I will die and not see my people again."

"You very sick," Wong said briefly and hurried Sing Wah to his cabin. He pointed at the dead Lee Sing. "Only by much good fortune can I prevent you becoming like him." It was too much for Sing Wah. He collapsed in Wong's arms.

Wong put an expression on his face that was like a smile. Sing Wah was now indeed ill. He immediately gave Sing Wah a harmless potion, which would speedily make him feel even worse.

Wong left the cabin, hurried along Prospect Creek till he came, evidently greatly excited, to a group of white miners. "Where is Masterson?" he demanded. "Where is the vigilante leader?"

A bearded hombre leaned on his shovel, appraised the little Chinese gambler speculatively. "Reckon Masterson's at his office, Wong."

"Thank you very much," Wong said. He reached in his pocket. "You take lottery ticket?"

The miners could not resist the crafty Chinaman's game of chance. Several purchased his tiny punched papers. But Wong would not take the bearded fellow's pinch of gold dust.

"No charge this time," he said. "You help Wong find Masterson. Thank you very much."

Masterson's face clouded when Wong finally found him and told what had happened the night before.

"I'm damn sorry, Wong," the committeeman said soberly. He massaged his chin thoughtfully with his fingers. "Wish I could do something to help you."

Wong's face did not show his contempt. He understood very well. "Lee Sing only Chinaman," he said bluntly. "Vigilante do nothing for Chinaman."

Masterson looked uncomfortable. "Now, Wong, if it was me had to decide—"

"Me understand," Wong interrupted. "Thank you very much." He turned, then faced back again, placed his hand in his pocket. "You buy ticket?"

Masterson took a ticket. Wong took a liberal pinch of dust. "I don't think you win anything," he said suggestively, his slanted eyes quietly condemning the man as he turned back toward his little cabin.

Wong knew now, for sure, that he could expect help from no one except Clark. And Clark was hated by the white men almost as much as the Chinamen.

♠ ♠ ♠

WONG returned to his cabin, knelt in a far corner and unlocked a teakwood chest. Sing Wah was too sick at his stomach now to pay any attention. Wong lifted the chest's false bottom to reveal a dozen knives, several bunches of firecrackers, packages of vegetable seeds and containers of itching powder. But of all these he chose only a dozen large candles, red, yellow and green.

While Wong's friends were completing Lee Sing's grave Clark stood to one side, the parrot on his shoulder. The bird's neck was extended, its green neck feathers extended. It was screeching again. Wong, coming up with the candles, recognized Clad Burdin and Flint Atroy standing on the other side of the grave.

The white men were mean, cruel-faced specimens. Both had been drinking. "Ya tryin' tuh dig yer Chink friend clear back tuh China, Wong?" Burdin smirked.

Wong flashed a quick warning to the sailor not to lose his temper. Clark was unarmed and Wong had only a knife concealed in his jacket. Many of Wong's countrymen carried knives, but a Chinaman must not attack a white man. He must not strike back, even in self-defense. Wong knew that only too well. There was a great fir tree in the main part of town where several of his friends had been hanged.

Wong disregarded Burdin and Atroy. Holding the candles in one hand and balancing himself with the other, he climbed down into the grave. Clark handed down several rough boards. Wong laid the boards flat, like flooring, arranged four candles, one at each corner. He struck a match and lighted the candles.

Curiosity overcame Burdin and Atroy. They stepped closer.

"What ya doin' with the candles, Chink?" Burdin called down.

Wong looked up, bland countenance solemn. "Lee Sing's ancestors came from same province where Confucius was born. Candle light guide him through darkness after death. Honorable ancestors recognize him in life beyond."

Burdin chuckled drunkenly. "Come on up, Chink. We want tuh talk tuh ya." He drew a sixgun and pointed it down into the hole.

Wong crawled up out of the grave and bowed politely to Burdin. "One moment, please," he pleaded. He turned to Clark. Then: "Dig other grave here," he said, indicating a nearby level space. Sing Wah very sick. He die."

Something approaching panic showed on the yellow faces in the crowd, but they began digging a second grave when Clark ordered them to.

Wong turned to the two ruffians. "You wait, please, till we bury Lee Sing?" He nodded to Clark. Burdin flourished his weapon impatiently but Wong appeared not to notice. He and Clark moved to the cabin and quickly returned with Lee Sing wrapped in a blanket.

The burial was simple. They lowered the corpse into the exceedingly deep grave; Wong spoke a brief Oriental prayer. Wong lowered the first shovelful

of dirt, spreading it carefully so as not to extinguish the candles. "The flame must be sealed forever within the mother of all, the good earth," he proclaimed.

"Get this poppycock over with," Burdin growled suddenly. He stepped menacingly toward the helpless Oriental.

Wong reached quietly into his pocket. "You buy lottery ticket?" he asked innocently.

"None of yer damn business," Burdin Burdin yelled. "Us miners held a meetin' last night, Wong. Atroy and me is the committee tuh tell ya what was decided."

"May ask who else was at meeting?" Wong inquired calmly.

"None o' yer damn business," Burdin barked. He talked fast and loud, as if to impress himself as well as the Chinese. "Most o' you Chinks ain't in the country legally. You got no rights. White men discovered Prospect Creek. It belongs tuh white men. We decided twenty thousand dollars was a fair price fer lettin' you heathens stay at this end o' the Creek."

Wong frowned. Clark shifted nearer. Several Chinamen with shovels gravitated toward the scene. Atroy's hand dropped to the butt of his gun.

"Do we get the money now," Burdin queried sarcastically, "or do we collect like we did from the guy yer puttin' in the hole?"

Wong held out his hands to caution his countrymen and Ben Clark. Come tomorrow night, please," he told Burdin. "Thank you very much." He turned, as if to terminate the discussion. Burdin leaped across the grave toward him.

"Aachach! Aachaach! Aachaach!" the parrot screamed. It leaped from Clark's shoulder, landed with surprising agility on Burdin's chest. Its sharp beak grabbed the shoulder cloth of his leather vest. It pulled itself upward and a moment later had hold of the man's ear.

Burdin screamed and danced with pain. Atroy dragged out his gun, ran around his partner crazily, trying to find a way to shoot the bird without hitting Burdin. Blood spurted from the wounded ear.

"Aach! Aachaach!" the bird screeched and still held on. Finally it released its hold. *"Murder! Murder!"* it yelled and leaped high in the air.

Burdin's gun spoke. Atroy fired too. *"Achach! Aach!"* cried the bird. It flew a good fifty feet and landed safely in the thick brush beyond the bank of Prospect Creek.

Burdin's face was contorted with rage. Blood still dripped from his torn ear. "We'll come tomorrow, Wong," he roared. Atroy hesitated before holstering his gun. Then they both went away.

Wong stood watching them silently. Turning to Clark he said, "Thank you very much. If there had not been white men here they would kill me in daylight." An expression came into his face that was like a smile. "Bring your case of dynamite now," he said.

They covered Lee Sing quickly. Wong himself helped finish the new grave. Clark brought the dynamite on one shoulder. The parrot, scolding and swearing as usual, had returned. The sailor put down the dynamite and uncoiled several feet of fuse which protruded from a corner of the square case.

"I fixed the caps and nailed the case shut again," he said.

"Thank you very much." Wong tossed dirt out of the grave until the case was entirely covered.

Evening came. Twilight. Darkness. Wong dug till Sing Wah's grave was deeper than Lee Sing's.

"Sing Wah have good burial," he said. The expression on his face was like a smile. "I bring more candles."

Clark pawed around in the loose dirt till he found something he was looking for. He stood in the dark and laughed. "Maybe I won't be alive this time tomorrow, Wong. Could I have a little drink

tonight. I think I'm gonna need a snort."

"You get drunk," Wong said.

♣ ♣ ♣

THE next evening Ben Clark walked into the Nugget gambling palace. He was bleary-eyed. He staggered as he walked. The parrot on his shoulder had nothing to say.

The sailor careened directly to the bar. "Whishkey," he ordered. "Lotsh o' whishkey; a whole quart o' whishkey."

The bartender grinned, slid a bottle forward. It was already a quarter empty. The parrot blinked a yellow eye at it and screeched, *"Aach!"*

Clark didn't seem to care if he was cheated. He paid with a generous amount of golddust and stood lop-sidedly still long enough to chart a precarious course across the barroom. Then he set sail in the general direction of where Burdin and Atroy sat at a table.

Clark steered close, yanked out a chair. He set the bottle down carefully, then reached up both hands to the parrot on his shoulder.

Burdin pushed back his chair. Atroy's hand rested on his gun-butt under the table. They eyed Clark suspiciously.

The parrot submitted to being placed in the middle of the table. It stood there eyeing the ruffians, one eye blinking slowly, the other focused intently on the man who had shot at it the day before.

"Me an' my bird," Clark sputtered, "came to apologize." He poured whiskey into his glass shakily. "It'sh damn fine tuh be around white people ag—agin. I can schmell Chinks! I can taste 'em. . . I seen enough t' last fer—ever." He leaned back in his chair, took a snort of whiskey and closed his eyes.

Burdin and Atroy exchanged glances, moved their chairs closer to the table. The parrot shifted back, pecked once at Clark's coat lapel, then climbed back on his shoulder. Clark blinked, sat up, swore at the bird for disturbing him, then leaned forward and spoke in a tone of half-drunken friendliness.

"Yuh ain't goin' t' get no money out o' them Chinks," he confided. "That Wong Charley, or Jimmy Wong, ain't no fool." Clark snickered. "Hell, yuh know what he'sh done? He'sh got all the Chinks tuh pack their gold in leather bangs and cache it in a hole at the bottom o' Sing Wah's grave."

A tender expression crept into Clark's bleary eyes. "Poor Sing Wah. Besht damn cook a ship ever had. Bet that damn Wong's crazshy medicine killed 'im. T'morrow mornin' b'fore sun-up, they'll bury 'im in that mud with them candles an' all that gold. They'll come back a year from now and scatter his bones all over hell an' take out the gold. Poor Sing Wah. . . Besht damn cook. . ."

Clark's head slumped forward on his arms on the table. The parrot, lurched off its perch, yelled, *"Heave ho, yuh lubber."*

But Clark just sat there, his head slumped forward on his arms, the whiskey bottle tipped over at his elbow, its contents dripping from the table. The glass rolled off onto the floor.

♦ ♦ ♦

LING HA WONG sat at the window of his shack, looking toward Prospect Creek, waiting. A late moon rose. At midnight the Chinese section was well lighted by its yellow glare. Wong could see the closer shacks standing out plainly. He could see the big fir, a quarter-mile up Prospect Creek, where the miners had tried to hang Sing Wah. But Sing Wah's newly dug grave was hidden by some of the other shacks. Wong could not see it.

The hours passed. The high canyon wall slowly shoved forward a great black shadow that absorbed the moonlight. It

was just before dawn. Suddenly an explosion, like the unheralded arrival of doom, shook the world. The air reverberated with blasting agonies of rolling sound. The noise tumbled across the flat, sliced through the canyon and climbed the cliff to the domed black heavens. Finally it died in distance.

Wong hurried to Ben Clark's shack, hammered on the door. Clark came, fully dressed, laughing like hell. The parrot was still perched on his shoulder, squawking protestingly at its master's noisy behavior.

"Burdin and Atroy sure thought I was cock-eyed," he exulted. "Maybe I should have been an actor."

Wong stepped with Clark to where Sing Wah's grave had been the night before. A crowd of Wong's countrymen moved cautiously closer. The noxious smell of the explosion soaked the air and soft upheaved ground where the grave had been. But the deep hole was completely filled. There was a low place now where the case of dynamite had rested. Blue smoke seemed to be drifting upward out of the moist soil.

Clark was still chuckling. "I could see dimly from my window even after the moon set. Both them gunmen climbed down to get the gold I'd told 'em about—just like we figured. They lighted the candles so they could see to take out the sacks of black sand we tucked away down there. They should have known red meant danger. I had the dynamite fuse rigged up to the red candle. When they lighted that it happened."

Wong said philosophically, "They are well buried in perpetual darkness." He instructed some of his countrymen to bring shovels and level the earth. A little later Fred Masterson arrived with some members of his Vigilante Committee.

"What happened, Wong?" Masterson said. "What was the noise all about?"

Wong's bland face looked sad. "Ben Clark," he grieved, "got drunk again." He looked reprovingly at the sailor. "He set off a whole case of dynamite."

"Anybody hurt?"

"Poor Sing Wah. Poor Sing Wah. He born in the same province as Confucius."

"Did Sing Wah get hurt?"

"Sing Wah die yesterday," Wong said reverently. "We bury him last night. I fear Ben Clark's blast has put out the flame of his candles. Sing Wah's honorable ancestors will have no light to recognize him in world beyond."

Masterson turned his face so Wong would not see him smile.

Wong stepped toward him. "You came to see that none of my humble people were injured," he said gratefully. "Thank you very much." He reached into his pocket. "You buy lottery ticket. I think you win good prize."

Masterson and some of his men bought lottery tickets, laughing and joking as they measured out gold dust in payment. Then they retraced their steps toward the town.

Ben Clark grinned. "Now we get to work and take out more gold." The parrot said *"Aachaach!"* in enthusiastic agreement.

Two weeks later, by the slow, tortuous ways the Chinese miners passed mail along in the California gold fields, Wong received a letter from San Francisco written in Chinese:

> Dear countryman, Ling Ha Wong:
> Humble self and family offer our eternal gratitude. Have deposited gold you gave me in San Francisco bank for Ben Clark and you, as you bade me. Have arranged for humble self to smuggle on windjammer which arrive Shanghai in first moon of new year.
>
> Humble Servant,
> Sing Wah

THAT DIE-HARD TEXAN!

Smashing novelette of a man sworn to tame one corner of the Staked Plains hell

By BARRY CORD

No one in that hushed saloon saw Rickers draw, but three shots hammered in the stillness as one prolonged sound.

CHAPTER ONE

The Hell on Wheels Kid

GARD RICKERS had come a long way in a hurry, but there was no impatience in his brown face. He pulled up on the edge of the small flat, his spare body loose and casual in the dusty saddle, and from the rock nest that hid him from prominent view he surveyed the

Could Card Rickers, Texas drifter, win vengeance for the vulture-eaten body of his pard by warring against both Ranger law and prairie owlhoot rats - - - with only a jewsharp to prove his payoff killings worthy in the eyes of Boothill's Gods?

cowtown sprawled across the Chisholm trail.

"I should not have let him go, Card. But you know the kid. Find him. And if he's—"

The voice was a whisper in Rickers' head; slow, a little brittle with the anxiety it covered—and for a moment Rickers seemed to see the blunt, weathered face of a man behind a desk . . .

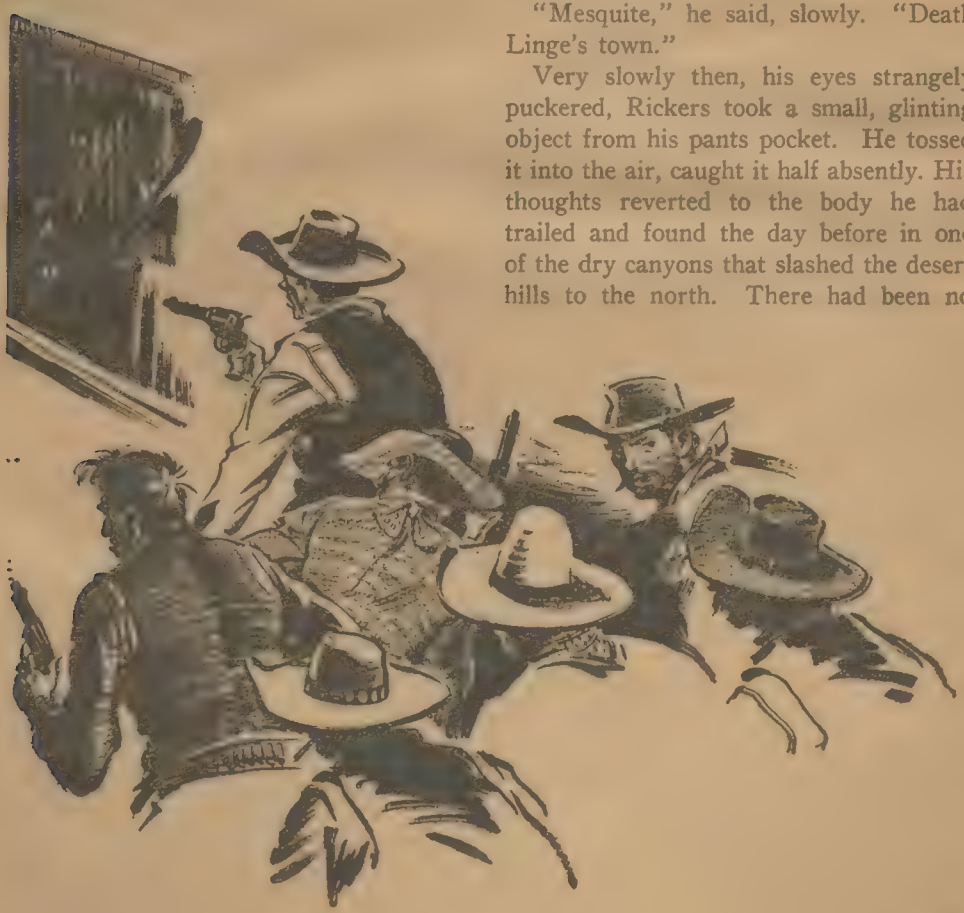
Tiny lines edged Rickers' hard mouth. He was a wiry, leathery-faced man somewhere between thirty and forty years of age. A thatch of sandy hair peeped from under his battered J. B. His eyes were blue, webbed at the corners—the eyes of a man who sees life steadily, with few illusions, with more than a trace of humor.

He rode with deceptive indolence. In times of stress his long, whalebone, steel-muscled frame could move with a swiftness matched by few men.

The westward dipping sun was at his back now, as he let his gaze run deliberately to the high, colorful abutments of the Staked Plains, looming like grim sentinels of Death a scant mile beyond the trail town. To the north lay the breaks of the Salt Fork and the North Fork, and lost in the shimmering distance was the long valley of the Canadian.

"Mesquite," he said, slowly. "Death Linge's town."

Very slowly then, his eyes strangely puckered, Rickers took a small, glinting object from his pants pocket. He tossed it into the air, caught it half absently. His thoughts reverted to the body he had trailed and found the day before in one of the dry canyons that slashed the desert hills to the north. There had been no



identifying marks on the week-old corpse, and the vultures and the coyotes had picked the bones clean. But in the sand, among the whitened, grisly relics, he had found this.

The kid's jewsharp! Rickers looked at it, seeing a curly-headed, laughing-eyed youngster riding by his side, twanging out a tune on the instrument.

His long, sinewy fingers tightened about the harp, and for an instant a harsh, cold light danced in his eyes. Then he shrugged and slipped out of the saddle.

His next motions were swift — and strange. From his saddlebag he brought forth a flat, narrow length of steel, and with this he pried the shoe from the roan's left hind foot. Tossing the shoe into the brush-choked gully beyond the rocks, he slipped the prying iron back into his saddlebag.

The roan whinnied questioningly as he patted the high, arched, dusty neck.

"Come along, Beelzebub," he growled. "The kid's dead. But down in Mesquite we'll find the guns that got him. An' the reason why!"

♦ ♦ ♦

LIKE a twisted horseshoe, carelessly discarded, Mesquite lay across the trail. Not so long ago the Kiowas and the Comanches had raided from the desert. Their shrill war cries still echoed in the memory of most of Mesquite's citizens.

Sprawling, ugly, baking in the hot sun, the trail town was just beginning to settle. The day-long sound of cattle across the sandy flats had ebbed these last years as much of the longhorn stream was diverted north along the Goodnight-Loving trail to Cheyenne.

For years Law had fought for a footing along the cattle trail, only to be submerged again and again in the raw, roaring turbulence of the '70s. Mesquite was such a town that had fought its fight for Law and Order—and lost!

One man ruled the trail town. *Death Linge!* From the Palo Duros down to the twisting Rio Grande the whisper of that name stiffened men in their tracks and whitened thin lips. Linge, the fastest, deadliest killer since Wild Bill Hickok!

The sun was slanting with ebbing force against the squalid false fronts when Rickers led the roan down Mesquite's main street. His battered hat rode low over his eyes, and he walked with hunched stride, dejected and tired. He raised his head once, to spot the open front of the blacksmith shop, where the steady clang of hammer on anvil was the only sound of activity. Then he lowered it again, and plodded on.

A warm drowsiness lay over the trail town. In front of a long adobe building marked LACEY'S GENERAL STORE, a buggy was drawn up to the rail. A stout woman in faded gray calico came out to the wide porch and stared across the street.

Rickers noticed her. There was fear in her, in the lines of her face. Her thick, toil-worn hands were clutched to her dress front.

Rickers frowned slightly, swinging his gaze after hers, wondering what was troubling her. And in that moment the quiet of Mesquite was abruptly broken.

A bottle crashed. A quick voice rasped angrily, and was smothered by a sudden chorus of shouts. The meaty thud of fists hammering on flesh drifted out to Rickers, who was drawing abreast the saloon from which the commotion emerged. A table crashed, then more bottles jangled, as if a thrown object had smashed among them. The yelling voices became confused.

Rickers halted in the road before the saloon steps. From the store porch, a little up the street, the careworn woman called: "Len! Len!" There was a tired-

ness to her voice that dulled her sharp anxiety.

The sounds of battle within the saloon increased. Someone cursed heavily. Then the shot that suddenly rang out seemed to bring a stunned quiet. A moment later the batwings slammed open.

A kid lurched out to the porch, caught his balance. Lithe, wide-shouldered, dark-haired and dark-eyed, there was a catlike smoothness to his movements, a suppleness of body that quickened Rickers' gaze.

The youngster was holding his right arm against his chest. Rickers could see the blood seeping through his fingers from a gash just above his elbow. But the kid's face, smooth-cheeked and lean, was hard and full of deviltry. It held no pain or fear—only a quick, defiant anger.

He hit the bottom of the four steps in one smooth, twisting jump, and was cutting down the boardwalk when the harsh voice stopped him.

The man who had shoved through the batwings was squat, heavily-muscled and square faced. He had a gun in his fist, and his lips were cut and bleeding. There was a long, curved gash over his right eye; blood trickled in a thin line into the dark stubble of his bearded cheek.

"Damn you, kid!" he yelled. He was breathing heavily, his nostrils flaring with the effort. "This is one time you—"

The youngster swung around and down like a twisting cat. There was death in that rasping voice, and he knew it. His left hand closed about a fair sized rock, and he lunged up with it, his face tight and unafraid . . .

Rickers shot the squat man in the right arm. The man grunted, fell back against the door framing, and dropped his Colt. He gripped his arm with his left hand, and stared down at Rickers, seeing the spare-framed tumbleweeder in the middle of the street for the first time.

Four range-garbed men crowded through the batwings a moment later. Angry voices asked questions. But they halted, as if they had suddenly run up against an invisible barrier. Slack-mouthed and silent, they stared down at the still smoking gun in Rickers' left hand, and the youngster's tensed, frowning face.

Craggy gents, these. Low-gunned and cold-eyed, they gave the impression of being able to hold their own in any company. But the marks of a hammering fist tabbed all of them, from a bruised eye to a smashed and bleeding nose.

Rickers grinned, a healthy respect for the fistic prowess of this strange, catlike youngster stirring in him. "Come here, kid," he said, "an' drop that stone."

The youngster hesitated. A thin sneer started to curl his lips. A hard, go-to-hell expression slid into his dark, rebellious eyes. He was like some wild animal then, that had never heeled to anyone's command.

Rickers' expression changed. He repeated, slowly: "Come here, kid!"

The sneer faded from the youngster's hard lips. For a long, silent moment he stared into Rickers' unwinking eyes, fighting the strange command in them. Then he dropped the rock, and walked to the spare-framed stranger in the middle of the street.

CHAPTER TWO

Ranger Law

A CROWD had begun to gather in the hot, dusty road. Through it the stout woman in faded calico pushed. She reached the youngster's side, caught him in her arms. Her voice was shaken. "Len! Oh, Len! Why—"

The youngster winced, tried to draw his right arm free. "Easy, auntie!" he muttered, shamefacedly. "I'm all right. Only my arm—"

The woman released him with a choked

little cry. "Len—you're hurt! Again!" She examined his bullet-gashed arm with quick fingers, the anxiety in her face giving way to a strange helplessness. "Len—what can I do with you? Must I always—"

"Ma'am," the squat gunman on the saloon steps cut in coldly, "yuh better figger out a few to keep that young wildcat home from now on. Next time you'll have to crate him back. I'm through takin' any more from him!"

His angry gaze moved on to Rickers, and a hard, judging look came into his eyes. "That goes for you, too, hombre. This was none of yore business. Yuh horned into it. I'll see you again—soon. Remember me—Barney Moore!"

Rickers shrugged, coldly. Someone in the crowd muttered, "That damn kid is always in trouble. Some day—"

The voice cut off as a tall, hawk-eyed man pushed into the circle. He was a long figure, wiry and blond, with a smooth, shaved face that gave the impression of being hewed from brown granite. He had a mouth like a shark's—an underslung gash in his face. Two guns, strapped to his thighs, backed the cold authority of a glinting badge on his gray shirt front. A silver star on his chest—Texas Ranger.

Rickers' eyes narrowed suddenly, and a strange, frowning stiffness came to his homely face. He dipped his head slightly, so that the wide brim of his J. B. shadowed his eyes.

The lawman ran a quick glance over the battered group on the saloon porch. Then it arced around to hook on the hard-faced youngster, the careworn woman, and the spare-framed stranger just beyond.

His voice was quick, brusque, hard. "What's up here? Who did the shootin'?"

The stocky Barney answered. "I did—some of it," he said coldly. "An I don't need no meddlin' Ranger to take care of things. This is between me an' that buttin'-in, gun-slingin' stranger."

The Ranger's hard jaw tightened, and a bleak look came into his eyes. "You got a lot to learn, Barney," he said metallically. "One is that law has come to Mesquite—Ranger law. Death Linge is through. Tell him, when he gets back. Tell him I'll be lookin' him up—right in his own back yard!"

"I'll tell him, Ranger," Barney sneered. "An' he'll be waitin'. Better have yore holsters greased—when yuh come."

The Ranger smiled thinly. Then he swung on the sullen-faced youngster. He saw Rickers clearly then, and his start was involuntary. A frown wedged his brow.

"What's yore angle, hombre?" he said, slowly.

Rickers moved his shoulders. He still held his Colt in his fist, as if he had forgotten it was there. "Just a passin' pilgrim, lawman," he said levelly. His eyes were blue and expressionless, and his lean frame sagged, as if a weight was upon it. "My cayuse threw a shoe back up the trail a ways. Mesquite had the nearest blacksmith—" He shifted his attention to the sneering Barney, engaged now in tying a handkerchief about his gashed arm.

"MEBBE I acted kinda without thinkin', lawman," Rickers explained. "But I saw a kid with a torn arm an' without a gun about to be shot like a mangy dog. I stopped it. I reckon that scratch won't bother Barney much."

The Ranger scowled. He was searching Rickers' long face as if trying to tag it to an elusive memory. He didn't quite succeed; the failure was there in his eyes.

"Mebbe it won't," he said, harshly. "But somethin' is botherin' *me*. Yore name for one. An' how long you figger to stay in Mesquite?"

Rickers' eyes clouded, and his face stiffened. "Smith's the name," he lied levelly. "John Smith, from up Twin Butte way. Stayin' just long enough to get my bronc shod an' a square meal under my belt. Any objections to that, lawman?"

The scowl in the Ranger's eyes faded to a bleak stare. "I'll be around to see you leave—*Smith,*" he countered grimly. Then he turned, scowled at the kid. "What were *you* doin' in the Come-and-Get-It? I thought I told you, the other day, to keep away from this end of town?"

The youngster sneered. He shook off his aunt's restraining hand. "I was out lookin' for Barney. I don't like his face."

Someone in the crowd snickered. Rickers laughed softly, inside. He was beginning to like this strange, blunt-mannered youngster with the wedgelike build.

"I saw him—good!" the youngster snapped. "The night a bunch of riders killed Lou Wilkins, an' burned his place, out by Squaw Creek. I can't prove it—seein' it's my word 'gainst his. But I *saw him.* Wilkins was jist a homesteader, like my aunt an' the others tryin' to farm the Squaw Creek bottomlands. He didn't ask for much. Jist to be let alone."

The kid's hard face turned toward Barney and his companions. "Five of them, lawmen!" he sneered. "Grown men—they got beards to prove it. I went in there lookin' for Barney, an' I found him. We had words. I hit him once, an' the others piled on. I didn't kick. But Barney had to use a gun—"

"Mister Lowny—please!" The stolid woman's voice was troubled, pleading. "He's hurt! I promise you he won't get into further trouble. We drove to town to get our plow fixed. The share was damaged on a rock while we were furrowing our south side. We're staying overnight with the Jordels. We'll leave, first thing in the morning. I promise!"

The Ranger hesitated.

Barney Moore shrugged. "My warnin' still goes, lawman. Next time that kid comes around I'm gonna shoot him." His gaze moved on to Rickers' impassive face, and his eyes narrowed. Then he turned, shoved through the batwings. His four battered companions followed.

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THE lawman broke up the crowd. The careworn woman thanked Rickers, who shifted uneasily, sliding the long-barreled Peacemaker into a worn holster. The kid watched, wordless, a strange, calculating glint in his dark eyes.

Rickers watched them move across the street to the buggy. The woman drove, tooling the team around with an experienced hand. They drove north up Main Street, and turned at the first corner.

The open-fronted blacksmith shop had a waiting list. Bill Sanders, the smith, a huge-armed man with a bushy black beard that reached down to his bared, hairy chest, was working a plowshare on the anvil when Rickers' long shadow fell across him.

He looked up at Rickers, surveying him with cool judgment. Then he pointed with the heavy hammer at cayuses and a buckboard waiting at the rack. "You'll have to wait yore turn, stranger."

Rickers nodded. He tied the roan to the rail, patted the dusty nose. "Mind if I fetch a pail of water for him?" he said, as the smith watched him.

The bearded man shrugged, jerked a thumb to the rear of the shop. Rickers found a bucket with clean water and set it before the thirsty animal.

"Hey!" the smith called as he started to move away. "You hear the fight down the street? Shots? I was busy, an' couldn't get away."

Rickers grinned. "Yeah. A kid start-

ed a rumpus in the Come-an'-Get-It Saloon. Took on five grown men. One of 'em I heard called Barney Moore. The kid's name was Len."

"Barney Moore, eh?" the smith grunted. "That damn killer—" He choked back the rest of it, his eyes narrowing on Rickers' impassive face.

Rickers shrugged. "Barney couldn't take his beatin'," he said levelly. "He tried to stop the kid with a gun. Someone stopped him—creased his gun arm."

Sanders spat on the floor. "Some day someone'll get that kid. But damn it, stranger, he's the only man with nerve left in the section. Everyone else crawls into a hole whenever the saloon bunch shows up. There hasn't been a good man in Mesquite since Art Merrill was killed."

"So the kid's kinda tough, eh?" Rickers cut in, pointing the conversation. He wanted to get a line on the youngster, and the bearded smith seemed in a talking mood.

"Tough is a mild word," Sanders growled. "If he ever learns to handle a Colt—" Sanders spread calloused hands in a quick gesture.

"His father was a carnival man," the smith added. "Tight-wire Powers, they billed him. Played New York an' most of the big towns back East. He was killed in Austin—tried to mix too much liquor with a high wire. His kid, Len, grew up on the wire with his father. He was doin' a trapeze act when his pop was killed. The show folded three days after. The kid was left stranded. His only livin' relative was his father's sister, Mary Hobart. She's got a homestead on Squaw Creek, some fourteen miles from town. She sent for the kid."

Rickers nodded slowly, and looked back up the street. The sun was beginning to redden against the westward windows.

"That was four years ago," Sanders continued, frowning. "Len was fifteen then, an' wilder than an unbroken colt. What he hasn't done these last years—"

Rickers smiled. "The kid's bad, eh?"

"Not *bad*—yet!" the smith qualified, scowling. "But there's no holdin' him. He's too much for Mary Hobart to handle, though the Lord knows she's been doin' all she can since her husband died. She tries to keep up the homestead by Squaw Creek, an' raise her own two children. One of 'em is a girl, only three years younger than Len."

Sanders shrugged. "One good thing—the kid does all his fightin' with his hands. He's like a cat on his feet, an' with those shoulders of his he hits with the kick of a mule. There ain't a man in Mesquite or miles around, regardless of age or weight, who'll stand up to Len with his fists."

Rickers laughed. "I kin believe it. I saw what he did to Barney an' four of Barney's friends." He frowned, thoughtfully. "A Ranger showed up when the trouble was over. Someone called him Lowny." Rickers looked past the smith into the darkening shop. "I thought Mesquite was a wide-open town."

"It was—until Lowny came," Sanders grunted. "We had six town marshals inside a year. Two of them resigned after a month in office, one disappeared. Three of them tried to buck Linge an' his crowd. They died."

Sanders' mouth twisted grimly. "There hasn't been a man to challenge Linge's gun rule since Art Merrill died, without clearin' leather, in front of Jake's Lunch. Until Lowny came to Mesquite." The bearded smith shrugged. "Down in the Four Flush an' in Galey's Emporium the odds are still three to one on Linge."

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RICKERS nodded slowly. "I heard of Linge, way back in El Paso. This Ranger, Lowny—he's sure got his nerve—buckin' him."

"He's a Texas Ranger, stranger;" the other growled. "They don't make 'em any nervier. Mesquite's been due for a gun cleanin' since Linge an' his bunch took over, near five years ago. This last year he's started to spread—bought out Mardy on Squaw Creek, forced out Jory Lee, an' burned out Lou Wilkins. The homesteaders can't stop him. They started cryin' for Ranger help. But it wasn't until Banker Cal Haskins sent word to Austin that they got an answer. Then, four days ago, Lowny showed up. Mesquite's quieted down a lot since, with Linge out of town somewhere, an' his crowd layin' low. But the real showdown's due when Linge gets back. Lowny's been doin' a lot of talk he'll have to back up."

Rickers grunted. "Mebbe I'll hang around to watch the fun. It ought to be worth seein'." He turned, walked back to the tired roan. "We come a long way since mornin'. Seein' yo're so busy, smith, I'll hunt up a stable for him. We'll be around in the mornin'."

He waved goodbye to the bearded man and swung the roan.

He found a stable four buildings up the street. He stripped the riding gear from the roan's back himself and fed the appreciative animal with his own hands.

The shadows were falling long across the street when he heeled out along the boardwalk and turned into the first eating house he saw. A sign over the walk read: JAKE'S LUNCH. Rickers found an unoccupied stool and ordered the regular dinner. He ate slowly, digesting the conversation about him, and when he finally slid off the stood, paid the waitress, and walked out, he was frowning.

He rolled a cigarette, absently lighted it. His face was grim in the momentary red flare. He knew, now, who had killed the kid. And he was beginning to sense why.

He walked slowly along Main Street. The town was strangely still. In the thickening shadows across the street two men stopped and stared at him. One nodded heavily. Then they moved on, soft-footed, and turned into a saloon.

A huge stone building loomed up on the northeast corner of Main and Anderson Streets. Its windows were barred—it seemed as impregnable as a fort. Rickers paused a moment to stare at the huge glass window fronting Main. Gilt letters read:

STOCKMAN'S BANK
CAL HASKINS, *Pres.*
Open 8:30 A. M. to 5 P. M.

The blinds were down in the windows and the door. But light seeped out below them.

Rickers turned as boots scuffed on the walk. A lean slab of a man toting a sawed off shotgun loomed up. He balanced on his toes facing Rickers. His tone was challenging. "Bank's closed, buddy. Get movin'!"

Rickers shrugged. "No offense, stranger," he grunted. "I'll be gettin' along."

The other watched him stonily. Rickers stepped off the walk and crossed the street.

He had found out what he wanted. He cut back along Main Street in long, swinging strides. Midtown, a canvas sign stretching across the street caught his attention. DESERT VIEW HOTEL. Rickers turned into the two-story frame building and took a room.

CHAPTER THREE

Grim Jokesters

THE room was warm, stuffy. Rickers opened the window. He was a cautious man. He stood to one side, out of line, and looked down on a

long, low adobe stable addition to the hotel. The pale roof was not four feet from his sill.

Rickers lighted a cigarette. He stood there a long time, frowning.

Unconsciously his hand went down to the hardness of the jewsharp in his pocket. "Sorry, kid. I came too late," he muttered slowly. He thought, then, of the blunt-faced man who was the kid's father, and his jaw tightened.

He dropped the cigarette, ground it out with his heel, and turned to the bed. He worked swiftly, using his gray dusty coat, the pillow, and several undersheets to make a deceiving bulge in the bed. He thrust a chair back under the knob, smiled grimly to himself, and blew out the light.

In the darkness he recrossed the room to the window. He left it open. The bed was some six feet from the window. Rickers stretched himself out on the floor along the wall. He closed his eyes, and in three minutes he was asleep.

The hours slipped by. The late rising moon probed with pale fingers into the room.

A boot made a soft, scraping sound. Then a voice whispered, very softly.

Rickers awoke. He had been asleep like a cat; he came up alert and ready. He grinned as he got noiselessly to his feet. His right hand palmed a gun.

A hand appeared on the sill. It held a gun. Then another joined it, and a shadowy head and torso filled the window opening. It stood there for some time, staring across at the vague mass on the bed.

A voice from behind it said, sibilantly, "What you waitin' for, Kerney?"

The shadowy Kerney grunted. He twisted across the sill and stood up inside the room, his gun held ready. He was a tall, wiry figure. He didn't see Rickers, crouched against the wall. He took a soft step forward. . . .

Rickers hit him with the side of his Peacemaker. The impact was smothered by a startled grunt from the man. Then Kerney sagged, and Rickers caught him. He eased him silently to the floor and twisted just as another prowler thrust his head through the window opening.

This man stood, staring in. He said, "Did you get him, Kerney?"

Rickers chuckled. "No," he said. The figure tried to twist away. Rickers slugged him, caught him as he sagged across the sill.

He pulled the man inside the room. He was short, this one, bull-necked and barrel-bodied. In the faint moonlight Rickers saw that both had bruised faces, and he remembered them, in that instant, as part of the quintet on the saloon porch.

He was bending over the man called Kerney when he sensed the third figure slip across the sill. He whirled, fast, swinging his Colt.

The shadowy intruder seemed to vanish. A hand clamped down on Rickers' gun arm, twisted. The strength in this shadowy assailant was astonishing. Rickers jerked, threw all his strength in the fast twist of his body to win free. His boot heels caught against the side of one of the sprawled forms. He went over backwards, and at the same instant a chopping fist smashed against his ear.

He twisted instinctively, and landed on his hands across Kerney's body. The Colt in his right hand made a thud against the floor. Rickers' head was ringing. He didn't have time to get to his feet. A lithe figure was on his shoulders, an iron arm sliding around his neck.

His breath was abruptly cut off.

With that, Rickers fought. All the laziness vanished from his long, sagging frame. He twisted erect despite the efforts of his silent assailant, whirled him around. The iron arm did not loosen, but Rickers succeeded in facing him. He

brought up his left palm into a hard, lean face.

The arm about his neck withdrew. The lithe figure moved with a swiftness Rickers couldn't follow. He saw the right hook too late to shift head; it nearly lifted him from his feet. He went down in a twisting fall, his head buzzing. His Colt swept up, lined on the shadowy figure lunging toward him.

He nearly pulled trigger. Then, all at once, he stiffened. He said, "Len! *Hold it—kid!*"

The youngster froze. He was revealed in the faint splash of moonlight—a lithe, balanced figure. His right arm was tightly bandaged. The struggle must have opened the gash. A dark blotch was spreading across the white cloth.

The kid relaxed. "Gee, I'm sorry, mister," he said. He was scarcely breathing. "I thought you were Kerney."

♦ ♦ ♦

RICKERS drew a long breath. His throat still ached to the crush of the youngster's grip, and his jaw felt unhinged. He rubbed it ruefully. He knew, now, how Barney must have felt, tangling with this wildcat.

"What in hell you doin', kid—prowlin' around at this hour? What's yore aunt gonna think?"

The kid shrugged, defiantly. "Aunt Mary doesn't know. She thinks I'm in bed." His tone was sullen. "I like to prowl around, stranger. Habit. I was behind the COME AN' GET IT tonight, an' I heard 'em talk. Kerney an' Bug-eye were sent to get you, ride you out of town, leave you afoot somewhere. Barney was against it. He wanted to take care of you personally. But this was orders. Who gave 'em I don't know. Linge's still out of town."

The kid looked down at the still unconscious forms. "I follered Kerney an' Bug-eye here. When I looked in I saw you bendin' over Kerney, an' I thought it was the other way around." Len shifted. "I kinda owed you somethin', stranger," he muttered, reluctantly. "Ain't no one in town would have bucked this crowd to save *my* hide. "Fact—" he grinned, "most people'ud give plenty to see my hide pegged out."

Rickers shrugged. He sensed the hot recklessness in the youngster, the cold defiance. Left on his own, without guidance from a strong hand, Len would wind up either in an early Boothill grave, or the long dark trail outside the law. A quick warm feeling surged through Rickers to take this youngster with him, when he left. . . .

"Thanks, kid," he said, slowly. He looked down at Bug-eye. The bull-necked killer had a coil of rope across his left shoulder. A grin touched Rickers' lips. "These hombres sure came prepared. It's a shame to waste that rope."

His grin spread. He whispered some more to the kid. Len stiffened, an unholy gleam sliding into his eyes. And in that moment a kinship was born between these two—one a mature, steady-eyed man, the other a lithe, rebellious youngster. The bond of a kindred spirit.

"Those saloon hombres will never live it down," Len gasped. "Boy, it'll be rich!"

The next minutes were silent, busy ones. The two unconscious gunmen were skillfully tied and gagged, and for added measure were wrapped like papooses in a bed sheet apiece.

The kid was shaking with suppressed laughted as he shouldered Bug-eye, and lugged him across the sill. He waited for Rickers on the stable roof, till the tall drifter came alongside, the long figure of Kerney draped sack-like across a sloping shoulder.

It was a half hour job, from there. The two would-be kidnappers had picked a

late hour. The town was asleep under the yellow stars. Moving silently, the kid and Rickers made their way to the dark front of the COME AND GET IT SALOON.

The saloon had a double front porch. Len went up one of the supports like a cat. He caught the end of the rope Rickers tossed him, and worked swiftly.

Five minutes later Kerney and Bug-eye were dangling over the saloon steps, strung between two posts, with their ankles tied together.

Strange, muffled gurgles came from the now conscious killers. Rickers, holding his own laughter, looked at the kid. The youngster was shaking, his eyes wet.

They shook hands, gravely, and parted.

CHAPTER FOUR

Barney Makes His Play

THE sun was bright against the window when Card Rickers rose, washed carefully, combed, felt gingerly of his slightly swollen jaw, and went down the stairs. He heard strange whispers in the lobby, and in JAKE'S LUNCH there was muffled laughter. The story was spreading like fire through Mesquite. Kerney and Bug-eye, two of Linge's hardcases, hung like sausages over the COME AND GET IT steps. They had dangled there till a late hour, when Barney Moore himself, coming out, had spotted their plight and had cut them down.

But mixed with the laughter was a grim tension. Barney had been ugly. And Linge was due in town today. *Linge!* It was like saying Death was coming to Mesquite!

Rickers stepped out into the street. Curious eyes followed him. In more than one mind suspicion lurked concerning the part played in last night's happenings by this spare-framed, indolent stranger.

Mary Hobart's buggy was drawn up before Sanders' shop when Card led the roan up to the door. Len was helping the smith get the repaired handplow over the tailgate. The careworn woman in the seat smiled a greeting as Rickers doffed his hat.

Len's eyes danced as he saw Rickers. He said, "Hello, stranger. You—"

He went silent, his eyes going cold and watchful on something behind Rickers. Card minced the roan back and turned.

Ranger Tom Lowny's tall figure was cutting across the street toward them. He walked catfooted, as if always alert, always tense. His hawk face was bleak.

He looked at Rickers, his eyes veiled. Then his gaze moved on to the kid who was climbing up beside his aunt.

His voice was steely. "Come down, Len."

The kid stiffened. Mary Hobart turned, surprise in her lined face.

The Ranger's voice was unemotional. "Kerney an' Bug-eye swore out a warrant for you, kid. They say you pulled that trick on them, last night."

Len's eyes flicked briefly to Rickers. He smiled, thinly.

Mary Hobart said, "There must be some mistake, officer. Len was asleep, in his room at the Jordels, last night."

"No," the youngster corrected. His face was a little flushed. "I'm sorry, Aunt Mary. But I *was* out last night. An' I reckon I did have a hand in stringin' Kerney an' Bug-eye up."

The Ranger's lips twisted. "It ain't what you done, kid. I'm buckin' that Linge crowd myself. But I'm the law in Mesquite at the moment, an' I won't have you or anyone else—" his cold gaze brushed over Rickers' immobile face—"takin' the law in *their* hands, or pullin' stunts like that. That's why I'm jailin' you, kid, till such time as you can stand trial."

He waited a moment, his eyes on the kid, on the still-faced smith, on Rickers. He seemed to be waiting for some move-

ment, some outbreak, on the spare-framed stranger's part. He was tensed, leaning forward, his hands slightly drawn up, close to jutting gun-butts. He was disappointed as the silence lengthened.

You comin' peaceful, kid?" he said.

A quick, dark stir of rebellion surged through the youngster. Ordinarily he would have fought such an order. Rickers, watching with blank gaze, sensed that the lawman expected an outbreak.

The youngster flashed Rickers a questioning glance. The older man nodded slightly. The youngster's lips tightened. He shrugged, went down and around the buggy. The woman looked on helplessly.

Bill Sanders swore, feelingly, forgetting Mary Hobart, as the lawman marched the kid down the street to the old jail-office he had taken over. Then, seeing the look in Rickers' eyes, he caught himself. He said, "Now, Mary—now. It ain't that bad. They've nothin' on Len. Any jury that'll sit in judgment on what he done to those skunks will vote him a medal of thanks."

The woman kept staring, stony-eyed, into space. "It ain't that, Bill," she said, dully. "It's the knowledge that I've failed that—hurts so. I've tried—tried hard. But last night when I thought—"

Her voice faded. The smith looked on, a lump in his throat.

Rickers turned away. There was little he could do to ease the broken woman on the buggy seat—though later, when his job was done, he would explain just what the youngster had done last night.

The FOUR FLUSH was the first saloon past the blacksmith shop, and he turned into it. He had most of the day to kill, before Linge returned.

He took his third glass of beer to the wall table, tilted his chair back against the wall, propped his spurred boots on the scarred surface. Oblivious to the frank scowls he eased his battered J.B. over his eyes, and dozed. . . .

THE afternoon shadows were inching out from the western walls when he went out. A hot sun beat against the tawny dust of Main Street. Save for several tail-switching cayuses at a rack down the street, a buckboard at another, and a mongrel dog lolling in the shade across the street, Mesquite was deserted.

Rickers clumped down the walk toward Bill Sanders' shop. The roan, he figured, would be shod by now.

Barney Moore's squat figure stepped out to the COME AND GET IT porch. He seemed to have been waiting for Rickers. He came down the steps, and turned up the walk, heading for the spare-framed tumbleweeder. His right arm was tightly bound, and swung free at his hip. His gun-butt brushed his fingers.

He came toward Rickers at a slow, even pace.

A faint smile touched Rickers' lips. He walked past the open-fronted blacksmith shop. He did not turn as Sanders called.

The bare-armed smith stopped his hammering. He came out to the walk, stared after Rickers.

The squat Barney halted, some ten paces before the mouth of a narrow alley. He waited for Rickers, slouched, hard-mouthed, making no move till Card was stepping into alley line. Then he said, swiftly and viciously, "I been waitin' all mornin' for this, Smith—"

He drew with a lunging motion. Rickers did a strange thing. He beat Barney's move by a full second, jumping back out of alley line, and cutting up with a long-barreled Peacemaker that seemed to materialize in his fist.

A rifle slug spanged viciously; boring a neat hole in the window of Farnum's mercantile across the street. Rickers killed Barney at the same instant. With one bullet. Then he was pivoting, slamming shots into the alley, crumpling up a surprised rifleman who had evidently been lying in wait behind a rain barrel.

The gunshots drew a crowd about him. Rickers stood, hard and cold-eyed, waiting. Rickers Lowny pushed through, surprise glinting briefly in his eyes. Then they cleared, went bleak, and he balanced on his toes.

The man behind the rain barrel was Kerney. The set-up bore out Rickers' drawled explanation. Bill Sanders excitedly corroborated his story. But the tenseness remained in the Ranger's eyes.

"For a drifter," he sneered, "you poke into plenty of trouble. An' you seem right handy with those guns. Too handy. I'm gonna give you another chance to use 'em. If yo're still here by sundown, I'm goin' to take 'em away from you—either peacefully, or from yore dead body. Take yore choice—*Smith!*"

Rickers nodded slowly, his face grave. "I'll be amblin'," he drawled, lazily.

Rickers mounted, said goodbye to the bearded Sanders, and left Mesquite. He loped west till the town was hidden from sight; then he swung wide in a quarter circle, grim and silent.

The shadows were falling across the low hills when he reached a spot on a well traveled trail to the north. He eased the rested roan into the brush, and up the side of a low, rocky hill. He picketed the animal out of sight of the trail, took a pair of high-power field glasses from his saddle bag, and found a comfortable spot where he could survey the trail below him unseen. Lighting a cigarette, he set himself to wait.

The sun went down in a blaze of color. Dusk was beginning to gray the hills when a rider showed up on the trail, coming at a steady gait from the north. He was still some distance away when another traveler, from Mesquite, rode to meet him.

Rickers brought the field glasses to focus. The rider from Mesquite was Bug-eye. He seemed excited, talking rapidly. The other was a dead-pan hombre, dressed in funereal black, lean and lithe and deadly as a ferret. Twin guns were strapped on the outside of his coat, pearl butts glinting in the fading light.

He nodded, said something out of the corner of his thin mouth. They then loped toward Mesquite, at a fast pace.

♠ ♠ ♠

RICKERS waited till they had vanished. He sat still a long time, tossing the jewsharp up in his hand, not seeing it. His mind was on other things—on the kid who had cheerfully played it by his side on other trails—and who now lay dead, his bones buried in the canyon where he had been ambushed.

Slowly he turned away. He went back to the roan, eased into the saddle.

Night was drawing its black curtain across the squalid buildings when he pulled up in a small arroyo in back of the stone bank and moved swiftly to the rear door. He knocked sharply, and waited.

Footsteps pounded along the alley. A hard-faced man, the same who had eyed him hostilely the night before, cut around the corner. He had the shotgun in his hands.

Rickers held up a hand. "Easy, hombre," he said. "I want to see Haskins."

A bar scraped back in the door before the guard could answer. It opened, and another shotgun was thrust almost in his face. A short, long-jawed man said, "What in hell!" Then, seeing the other guard, he said, "What's up, Polk?"

Polk shrugged. "I heard the knock, and hot-footed around to the back. It's the same hombre I told you about the other night. He's askin' for Haskins." He frowned at Rickers. "Ain't he the gent who gunned Barney an' Kerney this afternoon? The hombre Lowny warned out of town?"

(Continued on page 106)

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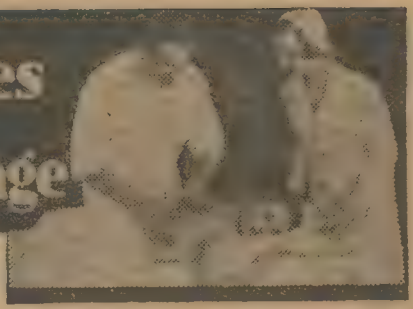

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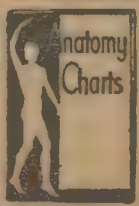

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(Continued from page 104)

The guard in the doorway nodded. "Yeah. I—"

Rickers cut in swiftly, "Let me see Haskins. You can keep me covered—take my guns, if you want. Wait—is Lowny in the bank?"

The man in the doorway and Polk exchanged glances. "No," the short man said. "But he's due back any minnit. Why?"

Rickers said, "I'll tell you inside. Take my guns, if you want."

They didn't take his guns. But at the yawning muzzles of two shotguns he was marched into the bank, and taken to the small room where Haskins had his private office. Cal Haskins was a slight man, gray-haired, with a Vandyke beard, a dignified carriage. He had a steady stare.

Rickers cut in before he could speak. He said, "Take a look at this, Haskins." He threw some papers on the desk.

Haskins shrugged. He bent down to the papers, glanced at them. His eyes widened. He jerked his head up to Rickers, questions leaping to his lips.

"There's no time, Haskins," Rickers snapped. "I want to get a few things straight. First: There's a lot of money in the bank? That's why you got guards about the place?"

Haskins nodded. "Yes. Close to eighty thousand, all told. Austin's forwarded us the big JD and Tumbling H payrolls."

"Where's Lowny?"

Haskins frowned. "Why—he stepped outside for a few minutes."

Rickers sneered. "Good!" In terse words he explained what he wanted. Standing there, grim faced, he was a far cry from the indolent stranger who had plodded into Mesquite. And when he was through talking there was understanding in the eyes of the three men in the office. . . .

(Continued on page 108)

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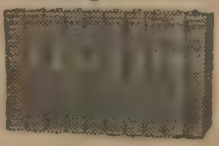

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(Continued from page 106)

CHAPTER FIVE

Ranger Substitute for Death

FIFTEEN minutes later Ranger Tom Lowny returned. The two guards were waiting in the closed bank, by the teller's cage. The door to Haskins' office was closed.

The lawman moved like a prowling cat. "Is Cal inside?"

Polk nodded, his eyes blank.

The bleak-eyed lawman spoke briskly. "Polk, you an' Bob better get outside with Sam an' Brownie. Keep yore eyes peeled. The payroll guard from the big ranches is due in tomorrow. If anyone's goin' to make a try for that money, it'll have to be done tonight."

Polk nodded. "Come on, Bob."

The hawk-faced lawman waited till they were gone. The big bank was empty; the single light in the overhead hook cast a dim illumination over the big steel safe behind the teller's cage. The Ranger's eyes glittered, and a harsh smile touched his slash of a mouth. He loosened his heavy guns.

Haskins rose from behind his desk as the lawman entered. His face was tight.

He said, slowly, "Linge is back in Mesquite, Tom."

The Ranger nodded. "Waitin' for me in the COME-AN'-GET-IT." The harsh grin seemed etched on his cruel lips. "Waitin' to face Ranger guns."

His mouth clamped shut, a stark look of surprise momentarily slackening his features.

Card Rickers had stepped out from behind the shielding wall of a file cabinet. There was a silver star on his sagging vest, and his right hand was loose at his side. In his left he held a jewsharp.

He said, coldly. "Remember this, Idaho? It belonged to the kid whose star

(Continued on page 110)

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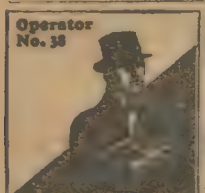

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yo're wearin'. Ranger Tom Lowny's!"

Idaho Raines' eyes held a trapped glitter. "Who—in hell—are you?"

"Card Rickers—Sergeant Ranger!" the tall drifter said evenly. "I came north too late to help the kid, but—"

The bogus Ranger leaped aside suddenly. It was a desperate man who struck for his guns. . . .

Rickers didn't seem to move. But his right hand gun flared from his hip, in a rolling burst hidden by a wreath of smoke.

Idaho Raines, Montana outlaw, sagged. He went down to his knees, his eyes wide on the grim-faced man who had beaten him. He tried to say something, but blood was in his throat. He collapsed, face forward, and lay still.

Card Rickers stood over him, the smoking gun still in his hand, the kid's jewsharp in the other. He said, tonelessly, "Yore mistake, Raines. Ranger Tom Lowny was my partner."

Polk and the other guards hurried in. They looked down at the dead outlaw

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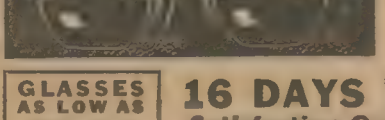

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with cold eyes. Polk shrugged. "So that was their game, Ranger." There was a new respect in his tone. "They ambushed the real Tom Lowny, when Linge found out Haskins had sent for Ranger help. Then they figgered out this angle to get the payroll money, with this hardcase posing as the Ranger."

Rickers nodded.

The short man called Bob licked his lips. "Linge's in the COME AN' GET IT—waitin'. Waitin' for Ranger Lowny."

Rickers grinned, coldly. His fist tightened on the jewsharp. Then he pocketed it.

"So Linge is waitin' to face Ranger guns? Well, I'm takin' Tom Lowny's place."

He looked down at the dead outlaw, and memory sent a frown into his eyes. "But first we'll let Len Powers out of jail. I reckon the kid ought to be in on

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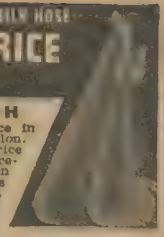

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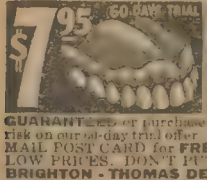

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DEATH LINGE paced along the bar front. He was a lean, quick-footed man. His thin face was drawn. The barroom was very still. Six of his gun hirelings were ranged along the wall tables.

They were nervous. Something had gone wrong with a smoothly worked out play. There had been shots in the bank, when there shouldn't have been a sound.

The doors suddenly creaked open. Len Powers shouldered into the saloon. His face was grim. He walked steadily to one side of the room and watched Linge.

The slatted doors creaked again. The four shotgun guards of Haskins' filed in, slowly. They ranged alongside the silent youngster. Then Haskins himself pushed through, straight and unsmiling—a .44 Frontier thrust in his waistband. And last—Rickers!

He moved in along the bar, faced the black-coated killer. The silence lengthened in the room, a silence that held the faint creakings of the batwing doors, the harsh breathing of men at the tables.

Rickers' drawled voice broke it. "Yore ringer, Idaho Raines, is in hell, Linge. I'm substitutin' for the real Tom Lowny."

Death Linge nodded. His eyes, deep sunk under bony ridges, shifted from the star on Rickers' vest to Rickers' long, impassive face. Recognition glinted in them.

"Card Rickers!" A grim sneer writhed his lips. "I always had a hunch that some day we'd meet like this. The two best gunhands south of the Palo Duros."

He drew then, under cover of his words. His hand vanished. . . .

No one in that hushed saloon saw Rickers draw, but three shots hammered the stillness as one prolonged sound.

Linge coughed, went down to one knee. The gun in his hand suddenly seemed too heavy for him. He looked at it in amazement, as if he couldn't believe. Then he looked up at Rickers.

"I wouldn't have believed. Damn it—no man—"

He died, with his gun in his hand, on one knee. Died without believing!

Rickers moved forward in a shocked stillness. The gash along his right ribs began to redden his shirt.

He said tonelessly, 'Yore rep was purty good, at that, Linge." Then his glance moving to the gun boss' holsters, he suddenly frowned. He bent, examined them. He thrust his Colt in the empty holster, and pressed on the butt.

The sheath, working on cleverly concealed, spring hinges, opened smoothly along the front, allowing the Colt to slip free.

Card straightened with a look of contempt. "Trick holsters!" he said.

Len moved up to Rickers' side, an almost worshipful light in his dark eyes.

Haskins moved his gaze to the watching men by the tables. "This section's got no place for any of you," he suggested, coldly, "I'm giving you two hours to clear out of town!"

The guards' four shotguns backed Haskins' words. The hard cases at the wall tables nodded. With Linge dead, they had no further interest in remaining.

♣ ♣ ♣

RANGER Card Rickers left Mesquite next morning. He mounted the big roan lazily, his battered hat down over his eyes.

Down the street a buggy drew up beside him. A saddled sorrel was tied to the tailgate.

Rickers paused. Len Powers, on the buggy seat beside his aunt, met his questioning glance.

"I kinda thought you'd like company on yore way back, Card," he said bluntly. "I reckon Mesquite'll be glad to get rid of me."

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Rickers looked at the careworn woman beside Len. She was smiling a little sadly. "You're the only person who seems able to handle him, Mister Rickers," she said slowly. "I'd rest much easier, knowin' Len was—"

Rickers' face was grave. "I'm a Texas Ranger, ma'am. My job takes me into trouble, most of the time. Perhaps Len—"

"Card—my middle name is trouble," the youngster cut in eagerly.

Card grinned. "You win, kid." He looked at Mary Hobart, and nodded understandingly at the unspoken words in her. "I'll look after him, ma'am," he promised.

They parted from the buggy at the Squaw Creek fork. Len kissed his aunt goodbye, and stood a moment, watching the buggy roll along the river trail.

Rickers was looking at a jewsharp when the kid swung up by his side. Card said quietly, "You know how to play this, kid?"

Len Powers looked up into his face. "I can learn," he said slowly. "Like a lot of other things I'm goin' to learn."

Rickers grinned.

The sun was in their faces. . . . Rickers' steady-eyed and mature . . . the youngster's keen and eager with the promise of the future.

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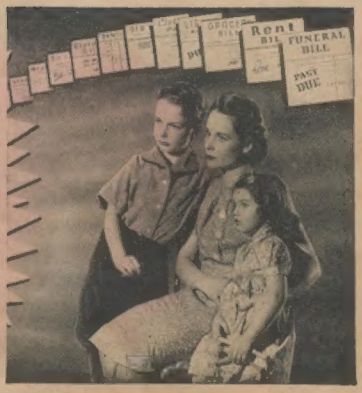

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